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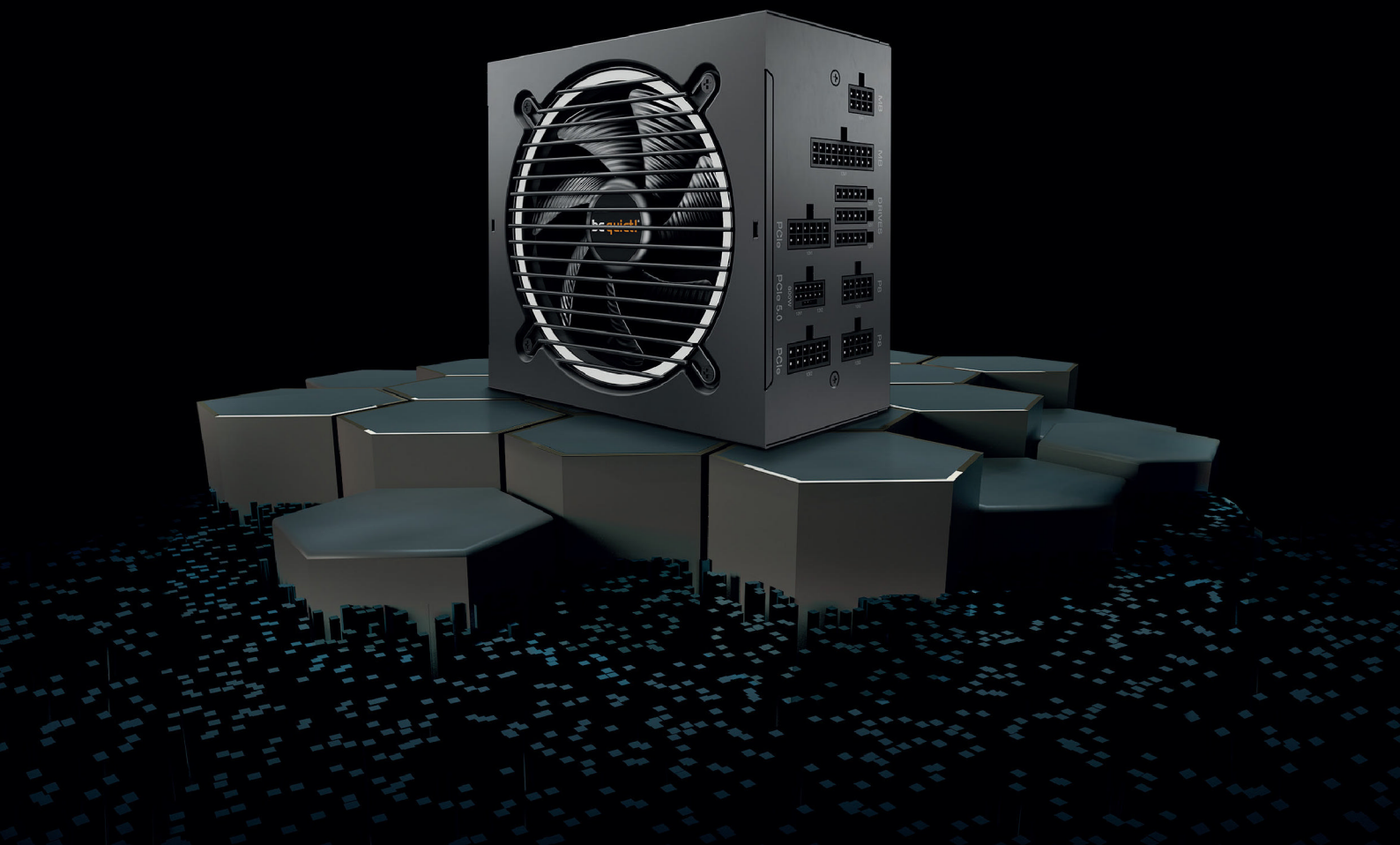

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"JOHN ROMERO IS A REALLY LOVELY GUY FOR SUCH A SATANIC DUDE"

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BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

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SEE p20

There's so much gaming goodness in this issue it's almost unbelievable. If you're an RPGer, then the new Baldur's Gate is pretty exciting. The original was such a brilliant eye-opener for so many gamers, discovering how rich storytelling could be in a game. Rob's been out visiting Larian Studios, the devs behind the resurrection of this legendary series. He loved what he saw (page 42) and his excitement is peaking. Yours might be, too, after reading his feature story.

I loved his Romero interview, too. Good job Rob – and John! I met him at the 1997 E3 in Atlanta where he was showing off Daikatana. It looked pretty fantastic at the time! John Romero is a really lovely guy for such a satanic dude. Shame about that game... but Romero is a legend and he's in this issue. Cheers John!

The PC PowerPlay team

MORGAN PARK

This month
Hung out with the protagonist of a '90s action B-movie. Made Hideo Kojima jealous.

WES FENLON

This month
Performed grisly executions on his enemies. Oh, and also played Mortal Kombat 1.

TYLER WILDE

This month
Tried to rob a bank without any planning or, well, an actual plan. Yeah, it didn't go well.

FRASER BROWN

This month
Commanded legions of ancient warriors to fight for him while wearing a totally fetch headdress.

Contents

#299
SPRING 2023

SUBSCRIBE TO PC PowerPlay
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SEE PAGE 20

Monitor

06 THE TOP STORY
Iran's not very quantum processor

08 THE SPY
New gaming rumours investigated

10 SPECIAL REPORT
The evolution of Lara Croft as an icon

12 SECRET LEVEL
How animation in videogames works

14 INCOMING
The hottest games to get excited for

Previews

16 Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown
24 Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty
26 Payday 3
30 Total War: Pharaoh
32 Alan Wake 2
34 Mortal Kombat 1
36 Star Wars Outlaws
38 Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora
40 Assassin's Creed Mirage

16 PRINCE OF PERSIA

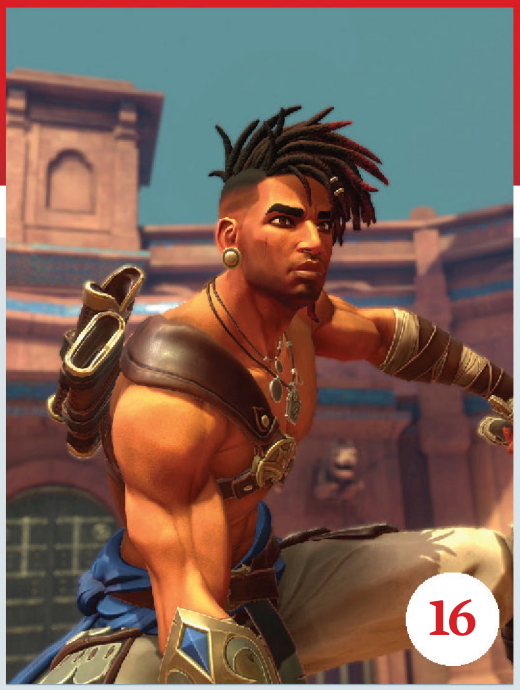
Mollie visits Ubisoft Montpellier to go hands on with the studio's exciting new 2D platformer *Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown*. Frenetic action and big energy await.

42 BALDUR'S GATE 3

It's been a long time coming, but *Baldur's Gate 3* is finally here, and it's taking the fantasy RPG genre to new heights. Rob visits Larian Studios for world exclusive access.

82 OLED GAMING MONITORS

They're the sexy new screens that are better than boring old LCD. Not cheap, though. Is it upgrade time?



52
JOHN ROMERO

Rob sits down with industry legend and FPS pioneer John Romero to talk about his life in game development and his new autobiography, Doom Guy.

76
NEW GAMING HEADSETS

The PC PowerPlay hardware lab tests six of the hottest new gaming headsets to hit the market.

94
BLACK & WHITE 2

Rob reinstalls *Black & White 2* and asks if it was the game where legendary designer Peter Molyneux took god games to their limit, for both better and worse.

Features

42 Baldur's Gate 3
54 John Romero

Reviews

58 Diablo 4
62 Mask of the Rose
64 The Lord of the Rings: Gollum
66 Hrot
68 Park Beyond
72 Lego 2K Drive

FREE GAMES

86 Ravenhaul
87 Crimson Fantasia
87 Neo City Express

Hardware

76 WIRELESS GAMING HEADPHONES
82 OLED GAMING MONITORS
88 TECH TALES

Extra Life

90 NOW PLAYING

Rage, Station to Station, System Shock, Star Wars Jedi: Survivor

94 REINSTALL

Did Peter Molyneux take god games as far as they could go in *Black & White 2*?

QUANTUM PROCESSOR?

The 'first product of the quantum processing algorithm' was, in fact, not that

PC PowerPlay's always looking to keep ahead of the latest hardware developments, and in our age of technological breakthroughs few things are more exciting than the field of quantum computing. Quantum computers like the IBM Q System One exist, but the long-awaited breakthrough which may never come is scalability. So it was serious news when the Imam Khomeini University of Marine Sciences and Technologies – in Iran – unveiled the so-called "first product of the quantum processing algorithm" – its own quantum processor.

TOP: Some claim that the announcement was actually about software, the board merely a prop, but... how do you run quantum software without quantum hardware?

In the presence of Iran's Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, coordinating deputy of the Islamic Republic's Army, the university held a press conference in June featuring this impressive looking 'quantum processor'. The board in question is only a few inches each side, with a radial circuitry pattern, though one that looked a little too rudimentary to feature any kind of quantum processing power on its own.

"YOU TOO CAN GET THIS 'QUANTUM PROCESSOR' FOR THE LOW PRICE OF $589"

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the claim came crumbling down in pretty spectacular fashion. Soon after the announcement, Gabriel Noronha, a former US Department of State advisor on Iran, discovered that this 'quantum processor' is actually a widely available development board.

"You too can get this 'quantum processor' for the low price of $589 on Amazon," said Noronha, attaching a screenshot of the Amazon product page. The board turned out to be a ZedBoard Zynq-7000 development SoC, and the true spec is nowhere

KILL SWITCH

MATTER OF LIFE OR BSOD

Did you know there's an emergency restart in Windows? Hit Ctrl + Alt + Del, hold down Ctrl, press the power icon in the corner, and you're a click away from the digital equivalent of yanking the handbrake. It's not to be trifled with, however, it's to be used "only as a last resort". ■ *JR*

FRESH HELL

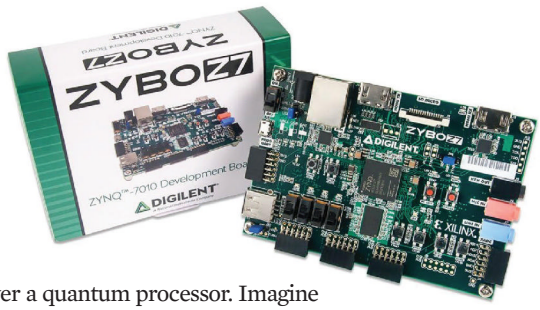
DIABLO IV'S 'MOST UNFAIR BUG'

After 173 hours in on a *Diablo IV* hardcore character, streamer Quin69 teleported back to town, only to find himself permanently murked without explanation in a loading screen. Yes, reader, there were tears. ■ *JW*

THE REALM OFFLINE

FIVE YEARS UP IN SMOKE

A relic of MMO history died a half-death last month. *The Realm Online*, a 27-year-old game from the age of graphical MUDs, was being kept going by devs from a sanctioned private server. They had the doors shut in their face after five years of work, and all that's left is a build from 2008. ■ *HR*



TOP: Iranian army Admiral Ali Fadavi has previously claimed that the Islamic world invented quantum mechanics 1,000 years ago and "remain the leaders and pioneers in these fields".

near enough to power a quantum processor. Imagine flipping qubits with just 256GB of storage, 512MB of DDR3 RAM and a dual-core ARM Cortex-A9 processor.

One sale site lists the board's applications as "video processing, motor control, software acceleration, Linux/Android/RTOS development, embedded ARM processing, general Zynq-7000 AP SoC prototyping". None of those appear quantum-adjacent, but you never know...

MALGORITHMS

Iranian news agency Tasnim explains that "to deal with future threats, it is necessary to pay attention to emerging and ground-breaking technologies". It also notes the board's use as "dealing with deception in positioning systems of surface vessels using algorithms".

This isn't the first time Iran tried to claim a technological breakthrough. The regime's worst error in this regard was its claims of developing a COVID-19 detector, which could detect the virus from 330 feet away. This device turned out to be a fake and part of a known Middle Eastern scam, where among other things it was claimed to detect bombs, fuel smugglers and AIDs. At least the worst consequences of the quantum processor are just a few laughs on the internet. ■

Katie Wickens

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Truckers 4 Life
American Truck Simulator players now see in-game ads from real American trucking companies.

Sim Ppl
Cities Skyline 2 now takes into account citizens' ages in how they make decisions.

GTA players GTA'd
GTA Online players are fuming after Rockstar made over 200 vehicles much harder to get a hold of.

TL; DR
Major Reddit drama as the site tries to crack down on third-party apps.

Burnt Toast
Streamer DisguisedToast spent $500,000 to found a *Valorant* pro team. Now he says the esports industry is a bust.

Really?
Skullgirls toned-down some of its racier elements. Players responded with review bombing.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

A lot of people assume that the *Metal Gear Solid* series is a silly romp through Hideo Kojima's overactive imagination. But people always mock what they don't understand. The Spy has decades of experience with stealth, infiltration, and on-site procurement, and The Spy says *MGS* might as well be a documentary. Cardboard boxes really are OP, magpies really do taste awful, and more than a few game publishers really do hire outlandish, cackling supervillains to guard their most precious secrets.

Sure, some of the series is *clearly* fictionalised – you expect The Spy to believe there's a place called 'Alaska'? – but The Spy has battled many a Hind D on a small roof with little cover, and thinks you all need to give the series a break.

Others, clearly, have been inspired by the lessons of *Metal Gear Solid*, and have taken it upon themselves to scour for clues as to Konami's upcoming plans – likely in tribute to *MGS2*'s parable about the suppression of memetic information on the internet. Is that what *MGS2* was about? The Spy didn't really understand it. Twitter user Nitroid noted a potential clue lurking on the new history page created alongside the announcement of the upcoming *Metal Gear Solid: Master Collection Vol 1*.

The history page features an old image of the *MGS* timeline. Here, though, instead of the same static image that has been used in the past, each game in the series gets its own button. For the games of *Vol 1*, that button links out to a new page created for the remastered versions.

Here's the interesting part: the other games in the series – *Peace Walker*, *Metal Gear Solid 4*, *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* – are also not static images. Instead they're inactive buttons that don't link out to a page. The speculation is that the reason Konami would do this is that those games will be updated with links of their own.

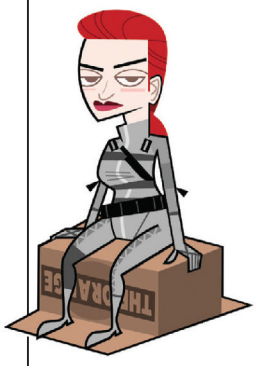
SNAKE?

To be clear, this is far from confirmation. It is entirely possible that the site functions like this purely for the sake of consistency. But in reporting on this speculation, IGN also noted that, based on the site's own understanding, *Peace Walker*, *MGS4* and *MGS5* is the planned lineup for *Vol 2*. The big news here would be the release of *MGS4* on other platforms, as to date it has never escaped the prison of the PlayStation 3. The received wisdom here is that the PS3's Cell architecture was just too baffling for a port to be feasible. This may not actually be true, though. In Steven L Kent's book, The Ultimate History of Video Games Vol 2, *MGS4* assistant producer Ryan Payton claims that *Metal Gear Solid 4* was, at one point "running beautifully and smoothly on an Xbox 360". This was an R&D test by Konami, but one that ultimately didn't pay off purely because the old Xbox used DVDs instead of Blu-ray discs. It would have simply taken too many discs to release on Xbox 360, so Konami pulled the plug.

THE BIG NEWS HERE WOULD BE THE RELEASE OF MGS4 ON OTHER PLATFORMS

The Spy sure hopes it happens. After all, *MGS4* is a baffling mess about two old men dramatically punching each other on the top of an old mech. See? Basically a documentary. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy only eats snakes of the gummy sweet variety.

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

A LARA DIVIDED

How TOMB RAIDER's early marketing campaigns objectified an icon

As a professor who studies the politics of games, I'm fascinated by the late 1990s. This period of massive technological innovation was also the crucible in which modern gaming culture was forged. When researching the era I sometimes encounter such an odd piece of gaming ephemera that I can't resist tracking it down – like Lara Croft: The Art of Virtual Seduction, a book published by Prima Games in 2000. "Everyone knows how to make this tomb raider jump, shimmy and swim," the ad suggested, "but do you know what makes her tick?" I did not know what made Lara tick, so I rushed to eBay to purchase a tattered copy. What arrived at my doorstep is a fascinating window into gaming at the turn of the millennium.

It's difficult to overstate the impact *Tomb Raider* had in 1996. Riding the wave of early 3D gaming, *Tomb Raider* helped redefine the action-adventure platformer and spawned numerous copycats. *Tomb Raider* had something going for it that its imitators couldn't match: Lara Croft.

VIRTUAL SEX SYMBOL

Today asking "who is Lara Croft?" would sound almost as absurd as asking "who is Mario?" Lara remains one of the most iconic characters in gaming history. But when Lara debuted, female protagonists were still quite rare – especially female action heroes. As a quippy gun-toting lead, Lara Croft occupied a space typically reserved for the Duke Nukems of the world. While the team at Core Design initially envisioned a male protagonist, the decision to change their hero into a heroine ended up dramatically shaping how Eidos would market the series.

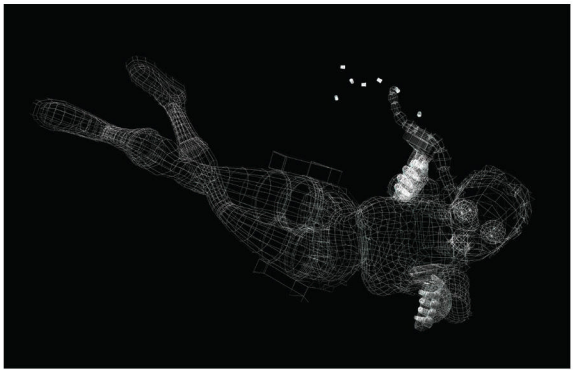
The mere existence of an officially licensed book titled Lara Croft: The Art of Virtual Seduction points to Lara's dual legacy as a groundbreaking female protagonist and a male gaze-ified sex symbol. A page-one editorial actually lists some of Lara's memorable physical traits, including her "imposingly voluptuous breasts". Later a feature explores what makes Lara so hot, "She is tall, has sensational breasts, a small waist and a luscious rear end that she saucily flaunts when she crawls on all fours. There's only one problem: she is not real."

Elsewhere, the book refers to Lara's "clear appeal to primal masculine instincts" and describes her as "a virtual woman who always does what you want her to do". No one ever described Mario as a virtual plumber who always plumbs what you want him to plumb.

The Art of Virtual Seduction's main selling point was its collection of centrefold-inspired 3D renders of Lara, provocatively posed and often wearing little to no clothing. The cover features a topless Lara with her arms

Jiggle Physics

Jiggle physics (or breast physics) entered the videogame lexicon in the mid-1990s as a shorthand term to describe the simulated – and usually exaggerated – movement of female characters' breasts. At the time, game developers and the gaming press alike would tout improved jiggle physics and the allocation of additional polygons to characters' chests as killer features in upcoming games. Not our finest hour.



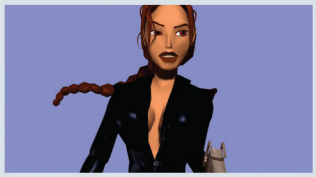
FAR LEFT: A wireframe model of a pistol-packing Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider 3*.

LEFT: A promotional render used for the cover of Lara Croft: The Art of Virtual Seduction.

IDENTITY CRISIS *The many faces of* Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft*

ADVENTURER
The *Tomb Raider* games portray Lara Croft as a globetrotting action hero – a rarity for female characters in the 1990s.

CENTREFOLD
Emphasising Lara's sex appeal, Eidos marketed *Tomb Raider* with pin-up style renders of their protagonist.



FASHIONISTA
As Lara's popularity skyrocketed, she appeared as a virtual model for fashion designers like Alexander McQueen.

IRL
Eidos hired a series of models like Nell McAndrew to portray Lara Croft in photoshoots and at live events.

wrapped around her breasts. Later in the book, she appears topless in bed, topless on the beach, topless on the floor of a tastefully decorated living room, and floating in an inky black void (while topless).

Lara Croft's unreal design garnered significant attention from Eidos, the press, and millions of teenagers. Print ads for *Tomb Raider 3* showcased a cleavage-forward image of Lara with the text, "We improved everything you asked for, but sorry, still no nude code."

LARA'S APPEAL

Lara Croft's gender was part of the *Tomb Raider* marketing formula from the beginning. "Maybe the reason you've never been man enough is you've always been a man," posits an early print ad. Another asks, "You know how it really hurts to get kicked right between the legs? Wuss." While skewering the masculinity of their target demographic was perhaps a risky strategy, it clearly paid off. The first *Tomb Raider* sold nearly eight million copies, with Eidos' market research indicating that 25% of those players were women and girls.

LARA CROFT'S GENDER WAS PART OF THE TOMB RAIDER MARKETING FORMULA

What is the secret of Lara's appeal? The Art of Virtual Seduction brings in an expert, psychologist Oscar Holzberg, to offer some questionable Freudian insights. "Men have become unsure of what is politically correct to say and how to act. Many real women have become too powerful for them; men are afraid of them and flee into virtual worlds," he says. "The child in a man can realise his masculinity with a completely harmless yet concentrated femininity. And when he does not want his virtual playmate any more, he can simply ignore her, without any feelings of guilt."

While Holzberg argues that male gamers are perhaps afraid of actual women, it's notable that The Art of Virtual Seduction also features photoshoots with models hired to portray Lara at conventions and other events. Several gaming magazines ran 'Win a Date with Lara' contests, offering desperate readers a chance to meet these models in person. In its contest rules, *PC Accelerator* noted that winners were not entitled to "any sort of touching or carousing with Lara Croft".

Paradoxically presented as both an empowered female lead and a sex object, Lara graced the cover of mainstream magazines like Time and Newsweek, appeared in comic books and television commercials, and modelled for high-end fashion designers like Gucci and Alexander McQueen. She even made nightly on-screen appearances on U2's 1997 PopMart tour, where, The Art of Seduction reports, "She posed in full, virtual beauty, then climbed onto her Harley and raced off."

Following reboots in 2006 and 2013, Lara's sex appeal is no longer the focal point of *Tomb Raider*. But bizarre relics like The Art of Virtual Seduction serve as mementos of gaming's encounters with gender and sexuality in the 1990s and 2000s and how they continue to shape gaming culture. And now I'm stuck with an unwanted reminder of my own – anyone know how to make eBay stop sending me alerts about a *Tomb Raider* strategy guide that came packaged with a paper Lara dress-up doll? ■

Jess Morrissette

ANIMATED DISCUSSION

Sumo Digital's THOMAS CROFTS on the craft and importance of animation in games

After studying computer science at Sheffield Hallam university, Thomas Crofts knew he wanted to work in games, but not precisely *how* . He ended up doing a Master's degree in videogame animation ("[It] seemed like the fun one," he says), which helped when he and some friends entered the Dare to be Digital contest in 2010.

Crofts, with three others from Sheffield Hallam, made a game for the competition in two months. Called *Grr!* it was, "A family friendly RTS like a simple *Dota*. We'd spent a lot of time integrating the Wiimote." *Grr!* missed out on the main prize, but won the Adult Swim award ("which as the animator of the team, I was quite chuffed with") for innovation and creativity; and Crofts and his team featured in the Channel 4 documentary on that year's event.

After leaving university, and honing his skills on a fan project *Duke Nukem* remake and by making entries for the 11 Second Club competition – where each month animators are challenged to provide an animation to match an 11 second audio clip – he landed his first job with TT Games... making a TV show.

TT Animation produced a children's show called What's Your News?, which Crofts worked on until he heard that parent company TT Games was looking for cutscene animators. This was his jumping-on point for the game industry. While many companies contract cutscene work to external studios, TT Games does it all in-house, as the *Lego* games feature so many of them.

A 'pre-vis' person is brought in first, to set up the basics of the scene; camera angles, character placement, props, and so on. Once these basics are finalised, animators such as Crofts go in to finish off the scene. Slowly. "I think we were doing probably three seconds a day," he says. "Pixar, they do three seconds every two weeks, but obviously they're the absolute pinnacle of animation. It was fantastic, but it nearly killed me."

ETERNAL FRAME

Why is animating such a scene so slow? "We work at 30 frames a second," Crofts explains. "Three seconds; that's 90 frames. So we've got to make sure we've got 90 pictures that really work." The animation process isn't quite so linear, either. Often, the key poses of an animation sequence – essentially milestones that need to be hit, such as a sword reaching a certain arc and then that sword hitting another character – are put in first, and then the extra frames to smooth things out are added later.

As labour intensive as cutscene animation is, animating in-game action brings with it a whole new set of challenges. Crofts uses the simple example of animating a character riding a bicycle. He'll need references to see what somebody riding a bike actually looks like, but that would just be the beginning of a very long animation journey. How long does the sequence of just getting onto the bike need to be, for example?

"It's all about feel. Hopefully design have a good idea and they'll say, 'Two-and-a-half seconds'. And you'll go back to your reference and realise it takes four seconds. You've got to do something at a very unnatural speed. What context will I be in before I go into riding the bike? You could be running, you could be standing still. What happens if you run to the left hand side of the bike instead of the right hand side of the bike?" All this and much more would have to be accounted for by the animators, as well as the coders that they'll need to be working in conjunction with.

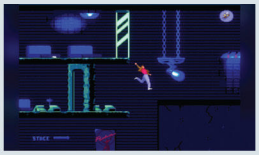
Animators need to communicate with multiple departments. Coding for implementation of the animation, the audio and VFX departments who add their touches at the end, design who dictate how long animations need to be. They provide a smooth experience in more ways than one. ■

Luke Kemp

SMOOTH AS SILK

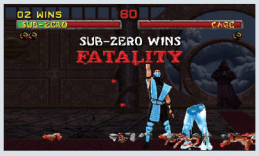
Some famous animation examples

CUPHEAD
Well known for its stunning 1930s-style hand-drawn animation and difficulty.



FLASHBACK
The game that had everybody tossing around the word 'rotoscope' like a basketball.

LA NOIRE
Rockstar was so confident in the motion capture, reading faces factored into gameplay.



MORTAL KOMBAT
Art alone couldn't have caused all that controversy; the animation had to be on point too.

"I THINK WE WERE DOING PROBABLY THREE SECONDS A DAY"

ABOVE: Crofts worked on *Until Dawn*'s facial animation during a stint at Cubic Motion.

FAR LEFT: There were probably some days where Crofts looked at his workload and started bricking it.

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

3 months

RATCHET & CLANK: RIFT APART

RELEASE July 26, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Insomniac Games

The iconic duo finally get a port from PS5, with a dimension-jumping adventure to blast through on offer. It's being upgraded for PC, too.

ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON

RELEASE August 24, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** FromSoftware Inc

After an 11-year gap the *Armored Core* series returns, promising even more massive stompy mechs, dazzling new graphics, and an epic story set in a dying star system.

BALDUR'S GATE 3

RELEASE August 31, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Larian Studios

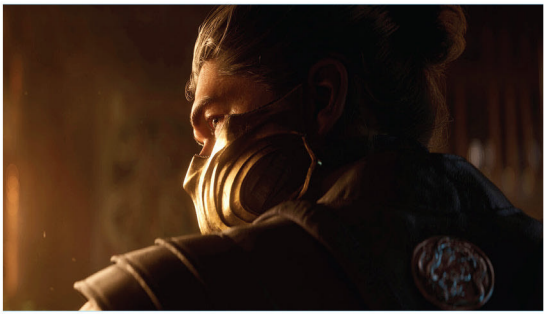
The legendary fantasy RPG returns in the hands of Larian Studios, the talented chaps behind the *Divinity: Original Sin* games. Minsc and Boo confirmed!

6 months

STARFIELD

RELEASE September 6, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Game Studios

We now have a confirmed release date for *Starfield*, with the open-world '*Skyrim* in space' RPG dropping in early September. Start planning your character now.



MORTAL KOMBAT 1

RELEASE September 19, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Netherealm Studios

The reborn *Mortal Kombat* universe created by the Fire God Liu Kang promises plenty of opportunities to gruesomely finish your foes.

ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASE October 17, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Remedy Entertainment

The long-awaited sequel promises more survival and psychological horrors, rejoining the story 13 years after Alan Wake went missing.

9 months

THE DAY BEFORE

RELEASE November 10, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Fntastic

An open-world zombie apocalypse survival MMO that at one point was the most wishlisted game on Steam, *The Day Before* is set to see the light of day in November.

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE December 2023 | **PUBLISHER** GSC Game World

The return to the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone is set for December this year, although no concrete release date has been announced.

WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Saber Interactive

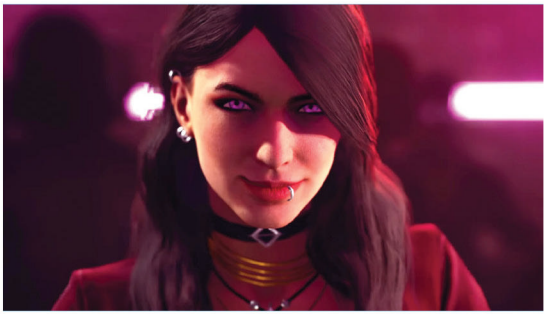
It's time to grab your chainsword and thunder hammer, and get rending and crushing orks, tyranids and more once again. Action-packed, gore-soaked sequel incoming in 2023.

12 months+

HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE February 2024 | **PUBLISHER** Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series has slipped out of 2023 into 2024, but still promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Unknown | **PUBLISHER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Will we see the RPG return from the dead in the next 12 months?

DEATH STRANDING 2

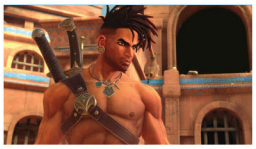
RELEASE Unknown | **PUBLISHER** Kojima Productions

The sequel to Hideo Kojima's critically acclaimed action adventure game/walking simulator *Death Stranding* is incoming, but with no fixed release date so far.

UPDATE

CYBERPUNK 2077

The incoming DLC, *Phantom Liberty* (see p24), overhauls the game's armour system, with the rating now detached from clothing. So no more sacrificing a killer look for defence. The cyberware system is changed, too, with too many installs carrying risks.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
January 18, 2024	Ubisoft Montpellier	Ubisoft	ubisoft.com

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

Not the *Prince of Persia* game you wanted, but the one you need

P*rince of Persia* meets *Dragon Ball Z* wasn't the elevator pitch I expected when I visited Ubisoft's Montpellier studio last month, but that's exactly what I got. The team frequently cite anime – and their love for it – as the inspiration behind the exuberant visual style for the upcoming *Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown*.

You wouldn't think it would work, but it does. *The Lost Crown* is still filled with gorgeous Persian architecture. Sprawling sandy columns and intricate statues adorn the small section I was given a hands-on with. But when I parry an enemy or unleash a super move, the landscapes are splattered by explosions of colour and animations that look like they're straight out of *Street Fighter* or *Dragon Ball FighterZ*. *Prince of Persia* is back, and this time it's brimming with style.

EMBRACE TRADITION

I know it's not exactly the *Prince of Persia* fans have come to expect, especially with the hotly-anticipated *Sands of Time* remake currently drifting on the desert winds. I'd consider it no bad thing that it's going for such a different feel, though. With the team behind *Rayman Legends* working on *The Lost Crown* for the last four years, the result is a gorgeous 2.5D sidescroller that hearkens back to *Prince of Persia*'s origins, plus all sorts of utterly devious puzzle platforming and some mighty satisfying execution.

I CAN MIX AND MATCH THESE MOVEMENT AND COMBAT ABILITIES TO TAKE ON ENEMIES

Preserving the 33-year legacy of the series while giving it a modern coat of paint has been a core goal of *The Lost Crown*'s development. This means waving goodbye to the unnamed Prince and saying hello to new hero Sargon. It does feel strange bidding farewell to the series' most recognisable face, but this upstart seems like a rather likeable young fella.

The team describes Sargon as being like a tiger, which emanates from the way he moves and fights. I'm able to sprint and airdash across large distances, slashing down upon enemies with my sword or taking a shot at them from a distance with my arrows. When I wanted to play more tactically, I could wait for the perfect moment to parry their moves and deal tons of damage. Sargon is also blessed with the classic time powers, being able to slow things down or use teleportation to anchor a past version of himself to zip back to at any moment.

I can mix and match these movement and combat abilities to take on enemies. Some require me to dash behind them and perform a melee combo at their backs, and I was able to leap into the air and swing my weapons down on two enemies on either side of me in a beautiful double-whammy attack. I could use my teleport to give myself a bit of breathing room in tense moments, too. Performing all these different attacks fills up my special meter, allowing me to perform super moves. Some of them let me heal up, while others deal huge chunks of damage to enemies.

PLAYED IT

SHOUNEN SARGON

The animations and colour palette play a huge part in what makes *The Lost Crown* so fun to play. Parries and super moves have a bright, kinetic energy which is part of Ubisoft's effort to modernise the series. I bring up the 2D fighter vibes to game director Mounir Radi, and he tells me I've hit the nail on the head. A huge *Street Fighter* fan, he looked at key mechanics like reversals work to shape *The Lost Crown*'s combat, flow and strategic plays. "You can take a risk by staying in the heat of combat, trying to avoid some attacks and launching your super just before losing the last HP that you have," says Radi. "That was something that I wanted the players to feel."

Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown

Radi cites anime like Hunter x Hunter, Beserk, Demon Slayer and Dragon Ball Z as influences on *The Lost Crown*'s look. The team has been rather clever with how much it's taken from Japanese animation. It's not a full-blown anime *Prince of Persia* game with all the trimmings of shounen dialogue. Rather, the inspiration comes through in the visual effects of Sargon's time powers, the way he appears to wall run when airdashing, and the Kamehameha-adjacent animation I witnessed after defeating my first boss.

There are glimpses of other pop culture too, with art director Jean-Christophe Alessandri citing a whole host of inspirations. "We love anime, we love superhero comics, all this energy you can find in this kind of art," he says. He goes on to explain that the whole team brought their own love for modern culture to the table, with things like street art and contemporary fashion coming into play as well. *The Lost Crown* feels a lot like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich: the ingredients seem at odds with each other, but with the right ratio they manage to work together in perfect harmony.

PLATFORMING PERFECTION

It's a significant shift for the series, but one that's sorely needed. *Prince of Persia* has struggled to find its feet in the last decade, but it feels like the series is right at home in the hands of the folks at Ubisoft Montpellier. Everything I'm shown – from my actual time with the game to every little detail stuffed into its Persian mythology enemies and level design, backed with a soundtrack from the fantastic Gareth Coker (of *Ori and the Blind Forest* fame) with trickles of colourfully dramatic animations – blends together beautifully. It's great that the game has such charming looks, but crucially it feels fantastic to play, too.

Movement is tight and responsive, which is vital for some of *The Lost Crown*'s intense puzzle platforming sequences. It makes the trial and error of completing them far less frustrating – my deaths always feel like a skill issue on my part, rather than the game doing me dirty. The checkpointing for the segments I played was right in the sweet spot too – far back enough to give enough challenge, but not so mean that I'm repeating long segments. There are some dastardly levels for sure, with pillars that fall from the sky out of nowhere and spikes that are tucked just out of the frame as Sargon drops down a narrow vertical gap. Tools like wall jumping and airdashing require precise timing, and some levels even include sections where I have to aim an arrow to shoot a platform trigger or even make use of his teleport ability to zip myself back up towards a vanishing floor.

There are tons of opportunities to stray off the path and explore secret areas. Even in the brief time I had with the game, I got to poke around nooks and crannies, finding secret entrances and hidden areas tucked away. Exploration is another huge part of *The Lost Crown*. For how fun and responsive moving around in this game is, it didn't feel like a chore to go hunting across the map to discover new locations. There are minimal guidance cues too, which left me free to play as I wanted without unnecessary hand-holding. Radi tells me that *The Lost Crown* will have a variety of settings and difficulties that can be tweaked, so those who want a more linear, story-driven experience with extra guidance can have that.

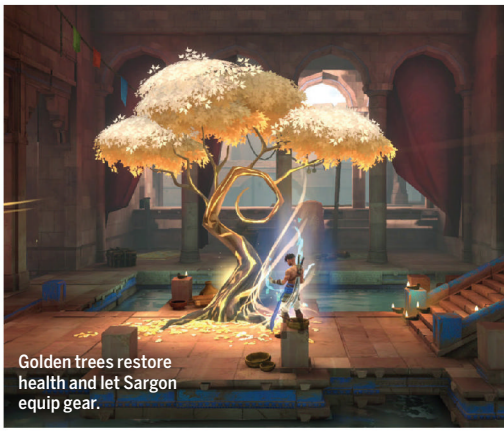
NEW BEGINNINGS

Radi calls the game "a new chapter", and I notice the team tries its best not to mention *Sands of Time* too much, but it's hard to hide from the series' most successful entry. "There are some links with the legacy. And I think some could see our game like a prequel, maybe, even if it's not." I ask if it's almost like a spiritual prequel, and Radi agrees. He says there are even some Easter eggs too, like a few classic sound effects and some ties to the lore from the 3D trilogy, saying, "They are scattered everywhere in the game." Alessandri also admits to me that there are a few Easter eggs to be discovered.

I have to agree with Radi when he calls it a new chapter – not just for the *Prince of Persia* story, but for the series. I know reception to *The Lost Crown*'s announcement wasn't too hot, but I think people have been far too quick to jump to conclusions. It's not *Prince of Persia* as we've come to know it, but considering how the last decade has gone for the series, is that necessarily a bad thing? I'm absolutely digging what *The Lost Crown* has going on right now. Trust me, once it's in your hands, it's going to blow you away.

Mollie Taylor

THE LOST CROWN FEELS A LOT LIKE A PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY SANDWICH



Golden trees restore health and let Sargon equip gear.

ABOVE: Boss battles put my knowledge of Sargon's toolkit to the test.

LEFT: New weapons can be forged if you ask the giant lady nicely.

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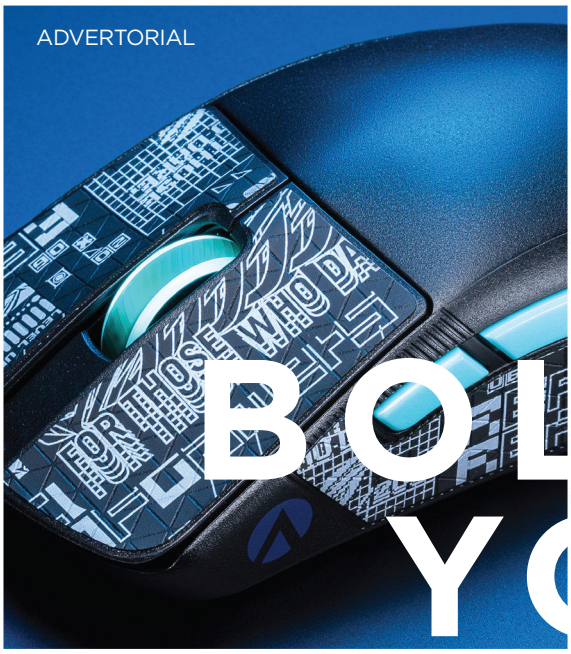


BOLSTER YOUR ARMOURY

HOW TO OWN THE SHOW WITH NEXT-GEN GAMING PERIPHERALS FROM ROG.

Something that genuinely good players generally have is the best gaming equipment. So, whether you're already winning and looking to maintain your dominance, or you're wanting to level-up your all-round, competitive gaming, you should check out ROG's latest RAIKIRI Pro controller (for PC and Xbox), plus the HARPE ACE Aim Lab Edition Gaming Mouse. Here's what you need to know.

ROG RAIKIRI PRO GAMING CONTROLLER

The ROG RAIKIRI Pro is a super-stylish, pro-level, gaming controller that works wirelessly with PC and as a wired alternative for your Xbox. It features a built-in OLED display, four, rear, programmable buttons, adjustable step triggers and configurable joystick sensitivity (including response curve tweaking). There's even an ESS DAC for audiophile-quality sound. Not sure what this all means? Let's check-out the core features.

BUILT-IN OLED SCREEN

Everyone wants OLED for everything, and now you can have it on your game controller, too. The small, bright, colourful, high-contrast screen can display at-a-glance status indicators; battery life; facilitate rapid profile switching; or it can be used as an epic display to show-off customisable messages and animations that inspire you to victory.

TRI-MODE CONNECTIVITY

The ROG RAIKIRI Pro can connect to your PC via USB-C, Bluetooth or low-latency 2.4GHz RF (with Adaptive Frequency Hopping to avoid wireless interference) providing perfect flexibility for your playing preference and play-space.

ARMOURY CRATE CONFIGURATIONS

You can use ASUS' Armoury Crate app to adjust the joystick sensitivity or remap buttons to get actions more-naturally fitting your playing style – without being dictated to by a crude, one-size-fits-all mapping. The app also lets you tailor the response curve of

each joystick, so that movement and aiming become second-nature according to the foibles of your own natural instincts.

ESS DAC

ESS is a premium manufacturer of audio chips and the RAIKIRI Pro's integrated DAC (Digital-to-Analog Converter) ensures that every important sound has the very best opportunity to reach your ears (via the 3.5mm audio jack) – and is crisper and clearer compared to other competitors. So, no more missed footsteps when enemies try to sneak-up behind you!

STEP TRIGGERS

Both left and right triggers can be quickly configured to full, or half-range actuation, using conveniently located, adjacent locks, to suit your shooting (and other gaming) preferences.

You can even set dead zones to suit your particular sniping style or supercharge other sensitive processes, simply by configuring them within Armoury Crate.

EXTRA PROGRAMMABLE BUTTONS

The RAIKIRI Pro has four intuitively accessed rear buttons that can be used for rapid, on-the-fly joystick sensitivity shifts (great for things like switching between 'run-and-gun' and sniping). They can also be programmed to activate in-game macros.

Whatever style of game you play, upgrading to the RAIKIRI Pro controller will improve your performance and (further) help you be the bane of your enemies.

ROG HARPE ACE AIM LAB EDITION

The pro-optimised ROG Harpe Ace Aim Lab Edition mouse has been designed with the attention to detail you'd expect from a hyper car. A weight-saving mission sees it tips the scales at a barely-there 54 grams while simultaneously offering highly honed ergonomics and next-gen sensitivity. Even the packaging has been designed to use less than 1% plastic. Here are the mouse's core details...

ULTRALIGHTWEIGHT

The 54-gram weight has been achieved through meticulous engineering and the use of an innovative, bio-based (eco-friendly) nylon construction material.

PRO-TESTED FORM FACTOR

Top eSports professionals have been consulted to hone the design of the ROG Harpe Ace Aim Lab Edition mouse. After 15 iterations, its ambidextrous shape is now perfectly balanced and weighted to ensure the utmost intuitive responsiveness. All this has been done to produce a professional tool that feels like a natural extension of your own hand.

AIM LAB SETTINGS OPTIMISER

Like all the very best competitive products, technology is packed into the innovative, lightweight chassis. Some of the most notable is ASUS' collaboration with Aim Lab, developing an aim training app which runs tests to identify your personal play-style proclivities, with regard to competitive mousing. It establishes whether you're prone to extravagant, quick-turn flicks, inconsistent turning and whether you like to physically lift a mouse up more than most. It does this in order to deliver consistent and stable movements and identify and mitigate (or accentuate) any positive-or-negative quirks in your playing.

INNOVATIVE INNARDS

The hardware inside the mouse is also impressive. The bespoke circuit board (PCB) has been optimised to suit the internal components, avoiding any wasted space, unbalanced bulk plus the introduction of any unnecessary weight. There's also storage space for the wireless dongle, so you can't easily lose it. There are ergonomic, customisable function buttons. Even the tactile scroll wheel encoder, which registers your selections in the most satisfying way, has been specially designed to optimise feel, accuracy and durability.

UNBELIEVABLY ACCURATE AND CONSISTENT

ASUS' new next-gen ROG AimPoint optical sensor in the ROG Harpe Ace Aim Lab Edition ranges from just 100dpi all the way to a next-gen 36,000dpi! It can register acceleration to a black-out inducing 50G at 650 inches per second (IPS), and it does this reliably with a CPI (counts per inch) deviation of less than 1% (the industry average is 3%). Whatever you're doing – no matter how slow or how fast you're doing it – this mouse will ensure maximum accuracy, all the time.

SUPERCHARGED CONNECTIVITY

The mouse can be connected via wired USB, Bluetooth or 2.4GHz RF. However, in order to ensure that the connection speed can match the internals, ASUS has developed its own ROG SpeedNova wireless technology. This ensures ultra-low latency in 2.4GHz RF mode and consistency through frequency scanning and maintaining a peak-performing polling rate, even in environments with noisy RF interference.

90 HOUR BATTERY LIFE

With so much powerful tech, it's fair to think about battery life, but the wireless charge lasts more-than three days(!) to ensure you won't run out of power at awkward moments!

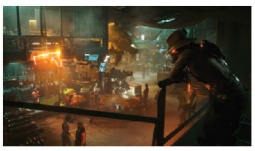
Ultimately, whatever standard of gamer you are, ROG has you covered with its new, pro-spec controller and mouse.

Check them out at **rog.asus.com/au**

Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty

ABOVE: I don't think a bike is the optimal vehicle here.

RIGHT: Idris Elba voices new character, Solomon Reed. Can he be trusted?



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
September 26, 2023	CD Projekt Red	CD Projekt	shorturl.at/tuAC0

CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY

We played *Cyberpunk 2077*'s expansion at Summer Game Fest

C*yberpunk 2077* wasn't always an easy game to love, but one thing I appreciated from day one was that V leaves a relatively small mark on the world. Sure, you cause some mayhem, but the movers and shakers of Night City always (rightly) treat V like a dispensable street punk.

Well, this punk's next mission is to save the president, and my partner-in-cybercrime is Idris Elba. It's an Escape From New York situation that lands V in the middle of this mess – my demo jumped around through the early parts of the story, but the gist is that the local leader of *Phantom Liberty*'s new district, Dogtown, shoots down Space Force One and V is the most capable mercenary around to help.

Dogtown is a new add-on to the Pacifica district, a chunk of Night City that was underutilised in the original game. CDPR describes Dogtown as a ghetto that's been left to rot by the city. The centrepiece of the district is a massive disused stadium that houses a bustling market. It's here that *Phantom Liberty*'s story kicks into gear, and where I was introduced to Colonel Hansen, Dogtown's local warlord who airs his reactionary political talk show on every screen in the district.

LORDS OF DOGTOWN

Had I not been playing with a time limit, I would've lost an hour to just walking around Dogtown and taking in the sights. Dogtown fills in the Pacifica district nicely, and CDPR is promising lots of new side gigs and activities to accompany the new location. That's exciting, because I had the most fun in *Cyberpunk* when I was ignoring the relic in my head and simply living the fantasy of my character instead.

Though, maybe Elba will steal the show in the main quest. I only met him the last third of the demo, where we hung out long enough to learn that he was president Rosalind Myer's best agent before he was burned by the agency and left for dead – he's basically the protagonist of a '90s action B-movie, and Elba is eating it up.

Phantom Liberty is also bringing some major gameplay changes that CDPR briefly talked about, but I didn't actually see in my demo. The studio sounded relieved to report that *Cyberpunk* now has a five-star notoriety system to complement its improved police AI. It sounds like cops will no longer spawn out of nowhere when you commit a crime. There's a new skill tree that expands on the combat augments like the Mantis Blades and Gorilla Arms. Car combat is a thing now, too. You'll be able to draw your weapon and shoot out of windows while driving, but CDPR said some cars now have guns mounted on the front of them.

PLAYED IT

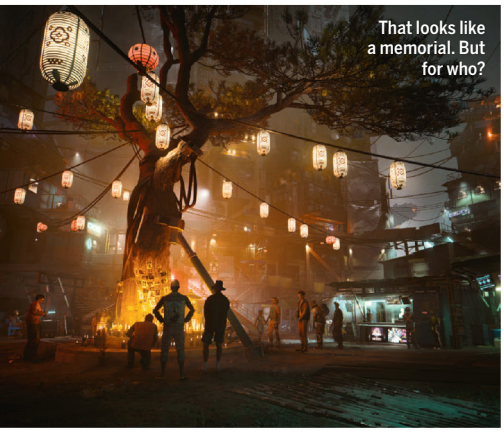
END OF THE WINE

CDPR was reluctant to fill in a few details about *Phantom Liberty*: no price has been announced, and they wouldn't give a rough estimate of how long it'd take to finish *Phantom Liberty*. My best guess is that *Phantom Liberty* will be about the length of one of *Cyberpunk*'s main questlines, plus all the side stuff.

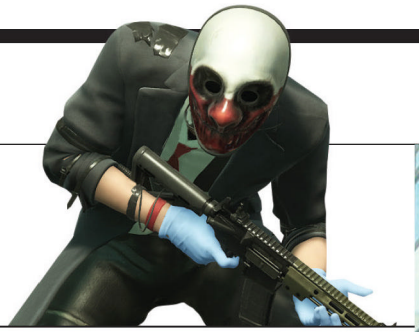
Based only on what I actually played, *Phantom Liberty* is so far a second helping of *Cyberpunk 2077*. If it were still 2021 that would've been a hard sell for me, but last year's *Edgerunners* update smoothed over some of the game's worst problems and let its best qualities shine – the characters, guns, cars, and unbelievably pretty city. If the *Phantom Liberty* update does the same, I'm hopeful it'll be the expansive send off that *Blood and Wine* was for *The Witcher 3*.

Morgan Park

HE'S BASICALLY THE PROTAGONIST OF A '90S ACTION B-MOVIE



That looks like a memorial. But for who?



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
September 21, 2023	Starbreeze Entertainment	Deep Silver	paydaythegame.com

PAYDAY 3

Robbing a bank without a plan is as hard as it sounds

In *Payday*'s world, SWAT teams respond instantaneously to blown heist attempts. They pile into banks and museums with licence to shoot on sight, and then they pile up in hallways as you and your team of super-thieves gun them down while shuttling riches into a getaway vehicle. You can play *Payday 3* like that, but I prefer the harder stealth approach, and my team and I came so close to pulling it off before I blew it.

Payday 3 doesn't stray far from the decade-old *Payday 2*. The co-op levels I previewed saw me and three heist-mates case a building, find a way in (front door, guns out is an option), and then complete a series of semi-randomised tasks to locate and remove its valuables. In Secure Capital Bank, the loud way into the vault involves collecting bags of thermite from the roof and burning a hole through the second floor. The quiet method is much more complicated, and includes the classic heist movie move of sticking a bank executive's face into a retinal scanner. That was the last thing I did before everything went sideways.

My team of thieves was made up of *Payday* novices, including me, and one Starbreeze developer who patiently tried to show us *Payday 3*'s deeper stealth system. Two stealth attempts ended because another player accidentally threw a grenade, one of the loudest things a person can accidentally do. One ended because a civilian spotted us climbing a fire escape and called the cops. Twice in a museum level I crossed a laser beam while trying to turn off the security system. And one time a guard caught me trying to pick a lock in the lobby of the bank and cuffed me.

NEW FOR PAYDAY 3 IS THE ABILITY TO USE CIVILIAN HOSTAGES AS HUMAN SHIELDS

YOU CAN'T BE HERE

New for *Payday 3* is the ability to use civilian hostages as human shields and 'negotiate' by releasing them in exchange for equipment deliveries or more time between assault waves. That's only an option when you put your Point Break-style masks on and go loud, and on normal difficulty it doesn't add much for me, but it may be more tactically relevant on harder difficulty levels.

The much bigger new decision in *Payday 3* is whether or not to mask up at all. When aiming for stealth, you can now infiltrate secure areas as a civilian, which significantly limits what you can do, but removes a lot of the risk of being caught: instead of a SWAT raid, you just get a firm talking-to, at least if the rest of your team stays out of sight.

PLAYED IT

For our last two stealth attempts on the bank level, my team and I walked unmasked to an employees-only side door by the parking lot, waited for a guard to look away, and then picked the lock and entered. Things did not stay that easy, and I was immediately nabbed by a guard. As he escorted me out, he spotted another of us, crouching behind an open locker door and cuffed him. As the rest of us stood around scratching our heads, our guide masked-up and shot the guard with a silenced pistol. It's still technically stealth.

Being detained can be a good thing: the next time I was being escorted out by a guard, I swiped the security badge off his belt, which would open doors for me later. After being deposited in the bank lobby, I walked right back to the parking lot and into the side entrance. It's silly, but I like the tension between maintaining plausible deniability or masking up. Once your mask is on, there's no taking it back, but the team can divide itself between masked and unmasked players.

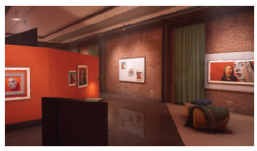
STAYING COOL

After a grenade accident, we voted to restart, and our final attempt started out

Payday 3

RIGHT: I guess we're doing this the loud way, then.

BELOW: Whatever you do, don't slip up on the job. Get it!



perfectly. We entered the same way and followed a cable to the second floor to find the big power switch that disables part of the vault's security system. After that we had to hit the correct symbol on a security gate to open it, and these are the kinds of things *Payday 3* randomises so you can't just memorise locations and solutions.

While that hunt was on, I remembered something our leader pointed out during a previous run: that if I entered the door labelled 'security' and somehow caused the camera feed operator to stop doing his job, we'd no longer have to worry about being spotted by security cams. Hoping to redeem myself with some extra credit, I picked the security room lock, entered, and instantly panicked: one, because a civilian saw me pick the lock and started freaking out, and two, because I hadn't thought about what I was going to do next.

You can't do anything violent without your mask on, and I hesitated almost too long before slapping it on and choking out the guard. With uncharacteristic calmness under pressure, I remembered to hold down a key to impersonate him over his radio so the other guards wouldn't become suspicious, something you can only do a few times. Then I casually walked back out the security room door, grabbed the panicking civilian, bound them up and stuffed them in the security room. Ta-da.

KEY MOMENT

After we bypassed the security gate, the next step was to find an executive and borrow his eyeballs for the retinal scanner. That was no problem, in part because by this point my team must've had half the bank's staff tied up and out of the way in a server room, so I had free rein to stroll into the guy's office and grab him.

While I held Mr Bank Guy's head up to the vault controls, our leader hacked his computer, which revealed a list of possible vault keypad codes in my HUD's objective tracker. My UV light illuminated fingerprints on some of the keypad numbers, and after the retinal scan I was supposed to enter the code that included those numbers. Except… I didn't know to look for a list of codes on my HUD, so an embarrassing scene ensued where our leader kept telling me over Discord that there are four options on the screen, and I, assuming he was referring to the executive's computer screen, couldn't understand why he wouldn't tell me what the four options were.

Before I figured it out, a civilian finally spotted us and called the police, the bank went into lockdown, and the vault became permanently unopenable. We had to switch to the thermite plan, more or less starting the level over.

DESPITE THE RANDOMISATION, SUCCESS IN PAYDAY DEPENDS A LOT ON EXPERIENCE

KNOWLEDGE IS MONEY

Despite the randomisation of specifics, success in *Payday* depends a lot on experience. In the museum heist I also tried, a certain computer tells you which exhibits contain the paintings you're after, a special scanner distinguishes the most valuable painting from its fake, and a USB key in a hidden vault deactivates its security system. When you and your team have that shopping list from the start, you can divide and conquer without all the frustrating fumbling around.

What's left is, ideally, lots of the fun kind of bumbling stealthiness: dropping through a skylight onto the edge of some geometry to avoid falling into a laser grid, scrambling into a ventilation duct to hide from a guard, frantically hiding tied-up civilians in side rooms. When our leader spontaneously slapped on his mask and murdered a guard who was about to call for back-up, it really felt like the moment in a heist movie where the greenhorns realise they've made a terrible mistake.

As a co-op shooter, on the other hand, *Payday 3* didn't do much for me during my demo. The enemies were doltish, standing in clumps and doing very little to avoid being shot. I enjoyed flanking the dudes with bulletproof riot shields, but that was mainly catharsis due to how often I'm tormented by shield users in *Rainbow Six Siege*. At a higher difficulty level with actually-scary enemies, I can imagine enjoying *Payday 3*'s shooting more. I also only tried a couple of guns, and didn't have any cool skills unlocked.

Now I'm wondering how all that stuff I didn't see will elaborate further on *Payday 2*. *Payday 3* ditches that game's ageing engine in favour of Unreal, which Starbreeze says allowed it to add new traversal options, as one example, but it's a conservative sequel without any huge heisting advancement to report. Maybe that's the right idea, given that *Payday 2* remains one of Steam's most-played games. Don't mess with success?

Tyler Wilde

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
October 2023	Creative Assembly Sofia	Sega	pharaoh.totalwar.com

TOTAL WAR: PHARAOH

Total War returns to a more grounded take

T*otal War* has been revelling in fantasy and legends for a good long while now, but with *Total War: Pharaoh* the series returns to its roots, presenting a more grounded vision of history, albeit with some artistic licence. But even without magic, gods and superhuman leaders, *Pharaoh* still has some tricks up its sleeve.

Set during the Bronze Age collapse, *Pharaoh* sees Egypt dealing with myriad crises: the death of its ruler, threats from neighbours and incursions from the enigmatic Sea Peoples – an invading force of unknown origin. The tumultuous nature of the period is reflected in a stability system that throws more dangers at you as stability is lowered, from invasions to natural disasters.

By the late Bronze Age, Egypt already had an illustrious history, which is reflected by legacies that players can select to help enforce their chosen playstyle. By emulating a ruler from the past, you can become a better builder, conqueror or a master of economics.

Egypt is not the sole playable empire in this conflict. While the Sea Peoples are an AI-controlled adversary, the Canaanites and Hittites will also be yours to lead – each with two faction leaders, while Egypt boasts four. Only Egypt was playable in the preview build, however, where I was able to fight a trio of battles that showcased some significant changes that have been included in the real-time portion of *Pharaoh*.

THE EFFECTS OF FIRE ARE FURTHER ENHANCED BY THE TEMPERATURE

With *Troy*, Creative Assembly Sofia tried to spice up battles by reflecting the weight of armour and introducing special environmental features; this is the case in *Pharaoh*, too. Heavier units will tire out faster, and they'll also get bogged down in mud, less able to fight in these conditions than their lighter counterparts.

GETTING DOWN AND DIRTY

This was convenient in the second battle, where I was able to lead enemy troops into a large muddy pool during a thunderstorm. As the enemy trudged through the swampy mess, getting absolutely covered in mud, my lighter troops struck, backed up by some javelin-tossing pals.

What's new is that *Pharaoh*'s battles feature dynamic weather conditions, too. In my first fight, where our forces collided amid large sand dunes, we ended up stuck in a nasty sandstorm. This obscures your vision, lowering the range of your troops, but it also makes them more fatigued and does a small amount of constant damage. Heavy rain, meanwhile, also affects range and accuracy, as well as making everything a bit muddier.

PLAYED IT

With *Pharaoh*, the impact of fire has also been enhanced. It's dynamic now, spreading across the battlefield, destroying buildings, burning trees to ash and killing off soldiers. The effects of fire are further enhanced by the temperature. When you're fighting in sweltering conditions, fire is going to be a lot more common and dangerous.

One of Creative Assembly Sofia's goals is to make battles slower-paced, but with the increased tactical nuance I hardly noticed that – I was too busy reacting to the changing weather and environmental quirks. Coming from *Warhammer III*, I definitely missed that game's weird and exotic roster of units, but these new additions kept me thoroughly engaged.

I'm optimistic about the scraps, but I've yet to see the campaign in action. I'm intrigued, though. As well as features like stability and legacies, there are some custom options that let you to randomise starting positions, the impact of natural disasters and more, which should be a boon for replayability. Hopefully I'll be able to take it for a spin before it launches.

Fraser Brown

Some muddy buddies having a party.

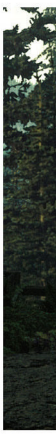
ABOVE: You won't see siege engines, but you'll be able to use sappers.

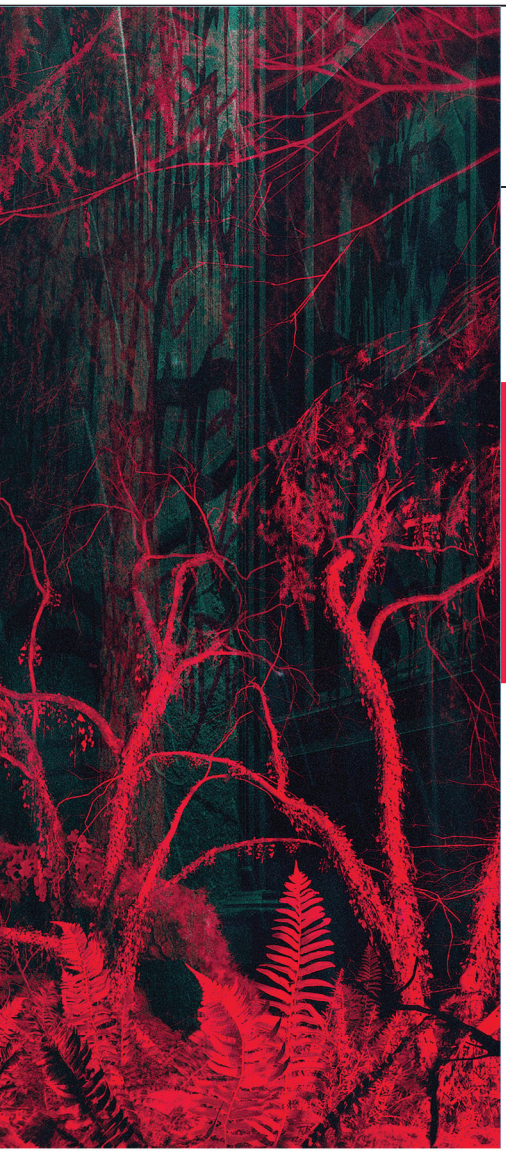
LEFT: Fire arrows are even more effective in *Pharaoh*.

Alan Wake 2

ABOVE: Impeccable horror mood setting, I have to say.

RIGHT: Anderson's humble mind place is a mind cabin, not a mind palace.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
October 17, 2023	Remedy Entertainment	Epic Games	alanwake.com

ALAN WAKE 2

Gorgeous and eerie, but the core mystery isn't convincing

The beard tech in *Alan Wake 2* is borderline inconceivable. Chasing realism may be the great folly(icle) of the games industry, but by god is it captivating when Remedy's doing it. It was hard not to be entranced by a demo of FBI agent Saga Anderson searching storm-battered woods to find Wake, who's been missing for 13 years.

Remedy is always playing with new tech, and for *Alan Wake 2* that meant refactoring its in-house engine to stream in data in an instant. It was a necessary change to let players enter Anderson's 'mind place' at the press of a button – a cabin players can walk around in and puzzle through the game's core mystery. There's a wall where you can place clues with red string threading them together, helping you visualise the case. Another button-press and you're right back to the real world – or as real as anything in *Alan Wake* gets.

The mind place was one of a few pieces of *Alan Wake 2*'s new investigation-focused design that underwhelmed me a bit during the half-hour demo. I'm sure a mystery is not easy to tease effectively in such a short period of time, but this chunk of Anderson's investigation mostly consisted of exploring an abandoned shack, finding a single clue, and that clue pointing to the next abandoned shack a 30-second walk away. Looking at and understanding evidence in the mind place may require a bit of deduction, but you can only put items in their one proper place on the red string board, which makes me worried there's not actually going to be much solving to be done here.

WAKE HAS HIS OWN ENVIRONMENTS YOU'LL EXPLORE IN THE DARK PLACE

Remedy says that *Alan Wake 2* features a hub you'll return to as Anderson, and Wake has his own environments you'll explore in the Dark Place where he's trapped. Perhaps this will allow for more open-ended investigation, or some puzzling out of how the Dark Place affects the real world. There's still potential for nuance that's missing in this linear demo, and I hope it's in there somewhere – we've seen some great mysteries in the last few years between *Paradise Killer*, *Case of the Golden Idol* and *Sherlock Holmes*.

COLD CASE

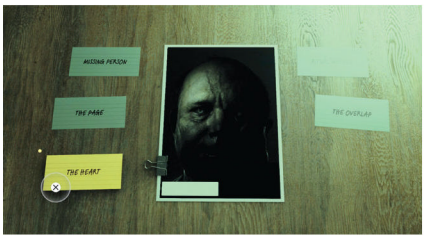
Being in that company would separate *Alan Wake 2* from modern *Resident Evil*, since it's also being pitched as survival horror. Despite a booming sawn-off shotgun, the little bit of *Alan Wake 2*'s combat shown in the demo was missing the claustrophobic dread of the *Resident Evil 2* remake. Visually *Alan Wake 2* is incredible – I've never played a mystery that drips with as much detail. Watching Anderson wading through a swampy section of forest as hundreds of trees and ferns whip around in the wind has me on edge, but combat is missing that crisis of choice survival horror hinges on.

FIRST LOOK

Resident Evil 2 is like a domino setup of tense decisions with its tight ammo supply, choosing when to fight, and knowing that the next time you run down that hallway the zombie you left behind will be waiting for you. In *Alan Wake 2* the shooting looks and sounds just as punchy, but seeing Anderson duck under a heavy axe swing from a monstrous lumberjack a couple of times, then headshotting him and moving on, smacked of more generic, less meaningful combat interludes.

As much as I loved the story in the first *Alan Wake*, I remember spending most of my time pointing my flashlight at enemies and starting generators. The sequel's ambitions are higher, and *Alan Wake 2* looks every inch a survival horror game with a Twin Peaksy mystery. What Remedy showed at Summer Game Fest just didn't quite convince it will be gripping to play.

Wes Fenlon



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
19 September 2023	NetherRealm Studios	Warner Bros Games	shorturl.at/eijqK

MORTAL KOMBAT 1

With *SF6* and *MK1*, we'll be talking about 2023 for decades

Every time a new *Mortal Kombat* arrives I think this is it: the one that'll be so freaking gross I can't stomach it any more. *MK1* threatened to be that game when Netherrealm trotted out a fatality montage to show off its latest skin-shredding tech, but playing it at Summer Game Fest, the gore didn't give me the same ick.

The dismemberments of *Mortal Kombat* are just punctuation, an eternal exclamation point at the end of every match. While I was playing this one, the sentence that kept running through my mind over and over was: this is going to be the best year for fighting games ever.

Mortal Kombat 1 is more polished than a crystal skull, almost as if Netherrealm could have just made a fighting game in its sleep and used the bulk of the last few years to focus on flair. The detail on these faces? Johnny Cage's cakes? The way two fighters square off in a short cutscene that masks loading, before flowing seamlessly into the fight? Mirror sheen.

Personally, though, I'd give it all up for my stupid-ass goofball create-a-character in *Street Fighter 6*'s story mode, which has me running around town fighting random weirdos with cardboard boxes on their heads. We don't know much about *Mortal Kombat 1*'s story mode yet, but so far it looks like it's doing more of what the last three *MK* games have done: remixing the series' convoluted lore in fun new ways, with cutscenes gradually creeping up on Hollywood CG-level realism. Maybe there's some surprise freedom hiding away in *MK1*'s story somewhere, but my bet is it'll mostly be cutscenes interspersed with fights again. I'd be pregaming disappointment about that if *Street Fighter 6* wasn't already here with a radically different experience: one where I can give Chun Li a can of sardines and hope it makes her like me. Why choose one or the other when we can have both?

EXUDES A DIFFERENT SORT OF CONFIDENCE THAN STREET FIGHTER 6

PLAYED IT

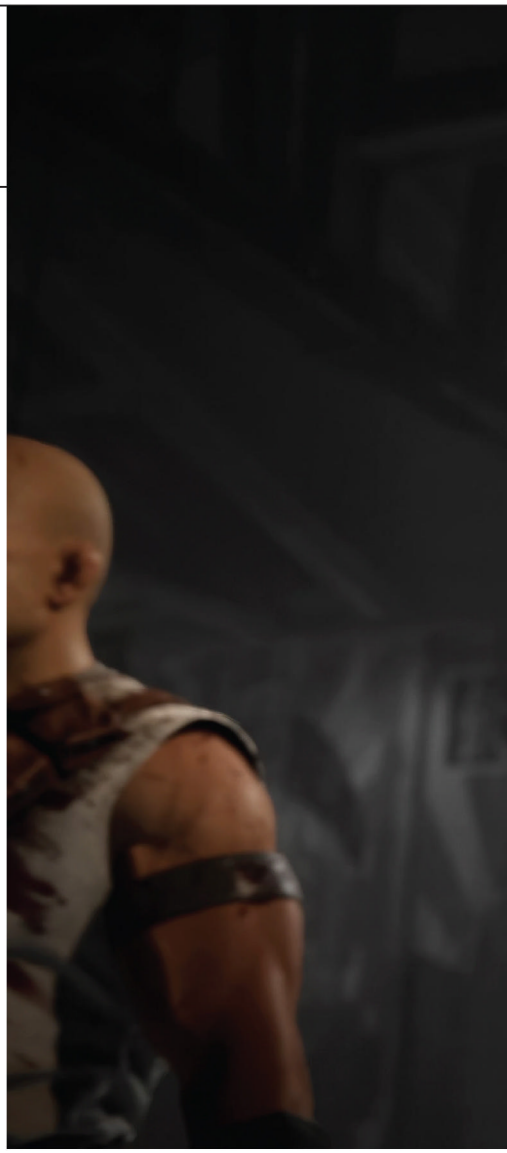
NEW CHALLENGERS

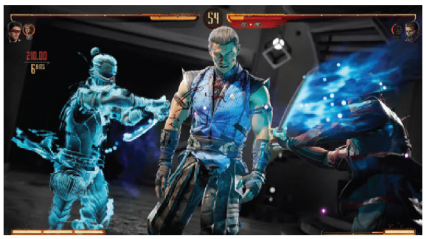
These two landing just months apart has echoes of November 2004, when *Halo 2* and *Half-Life 2* were pulling FPS games in such different directions they threatened to tear the genre's arms off. This time we're getting a pair of fighting games from teams at the peak of their craft – an absolute feast of fists. A platter of punches. A banquet of beatdowns. A quiche full of KOs. Then there's the looming presence of *Tekken 8*. We don't know if it will arrive in 2023, but chances seem pretty damn good – Bandai Namco is running a network test in July.

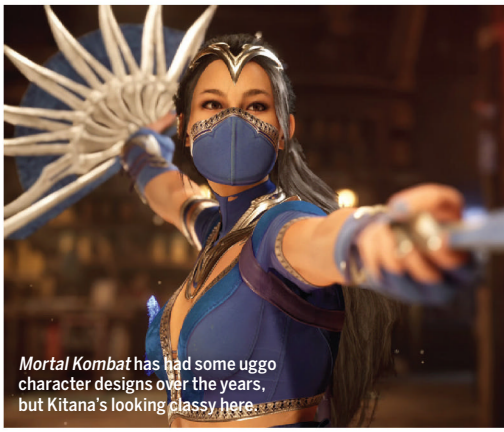
Mortal Kombat 1 exudes a different sort of confidence than *Street Fighter 6*: steady, practical evolution rather than joyous creative rebirth. If you liked the last three *Mortal Kombat*s, you'll like this one. *Mortal Kombat* and *Tekken* are both the kinds of games that people will buy on the strength of their graphics alone, but of course they've got more than that going on. *MK1*'s Kameo system is a clever way to integrate some of the depth of a tag fighter while adding more nuanced control over how your AI partner jumps in with an assist; *Tekken 8*'s adding multiple systems that reward aggressive play and a new control type for inexperienced players.

But I can't overstate how much *Street Fighter 6*'s story mode and its modern controls option are going to appeal to people who always assumed *Street Fighter* wasn't for them. Capcom, Bandai Namco and Netherrealm are definitely going to sell more fighting games in the next 12 months than at any time in fighting game history. I have a feeling once 2023 fully sinks in and we see how many new people have jumped into the ring, the next few are really going to take us for a ride.

Wes Fenlon







Mortal Kombat has had some uggo character designs over the years, but Kitana's looking classy here.

ABOVE: Liu Kang has swapped places with Raiden in *MK1*, grabbing some godly powers.

LEFT: Kano really lights up the room with his Kameo.

Star Wars Outlaws

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2024	Massive Entertainment	Ubisoft	shorturl.at/IFKZ7

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

Ubisoft's *Star Wars* game looks like the best thing it's made in ages

If you ask everyone in the room to describe their perfect vision for a *Star Wars* game, you're gonna get a lot of answers. Many would, I wager, basically describe *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor*: a lightsaber power fantasy with memorable characters, cool Force powers and satisfying Stormtrooper amputation.

My pitch would sound a lot closer to the game that Ubisoft announced at the Xbox Games Showcase, *Star Wars Outlaws* – a sandbox action game starring a Solo-like scoundrel-for-hire on the lawless planets of the Outer Rim. No, it's not the Mandalorian game that I was quietly crossing my fingers for, but a completely new character instead: Kay Vess, a young outlaw getting her start in the criminal underworld.

Outlaws takes place in the gap between The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi. For those who haven't kept up perfectly with the barrage of Star Wars stories lately, that places *Outlaws* something like a decade after *Jedi: Survivor* and a few years before The Mandalorian. It's developed by Massive, the Ubisoft Sweden branch that's also making *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* (see p36), previously made *The Division 1* and *2*, and the 2007 RTS *World in Conflict*.

Massive's résumé is part of the reason I'm so surprised by *Outlaws*. I was expecting *Star Wars: The Division* but what Massive actually seems to be making is open-world *Uncharted*. That description may sound like Ubisoft is muscling into EA's turf, but where *Jedi: Survivor* has open levels that spoke off from each other, *Outlaws*' planets appear to be much larger sandboxes – big enough that Kay Vess crosses them on her trusty speeder.

IN THE DEMO, KAY PICKS A DIALOGUE CHOICE THAT ANGERS A CORRUPT OFFICER

The demo gameplay suggests that *Outlaw* is emphasising stealth over constant combat. You can go loud, but Ubi suggested avoidance is often a better option. Kay's blaster is her primary weapon, and it has different modes: I spotted a focus mode that was more accurate but appeared to shoot slower. Kay does briefly pick up a bigger blaster off an enemy body, but they have limited ammo and (probably) can't be pocketed for later use. You take jobs for and against various factions in the galaxy, and when you take actions against them, you'll lose reputation for that faction.

FIRST LOOK

NO MAN'S STAR WARS

Unlike the *Jedi* series, you actually fly your ship around the galaxy in *Outlaws*. It sounds a bit like *No Man's Sky* and *Starfield* – dogfights, resource gathering and jumps through hyperspace to other planets. In the demo Kay picks a dialogue choice that angers a corrupt imperial officer and instantly makes her wanted, but it's not clear how often these choices will come up.

Flying the ship sure was a surprise for me. It looked like the process of taking off and entering space was automatic, so you probably can't fly close to the ground like in *No Man's Sky*, but Ubi says space exploration is a big part of *Outlaws* – there are secrets to find in the void, and space combat varies from intimate dogfights to larger-scale battles.

My only worry about *Outlaws* is that if the whole game is essentially what we saw – sneaking, shooting, driving, flying – then it will have only scratched the surface of what I want from an open-world *Star Wars* game. I hope Kay can also do some of the quieter actions that made Arthur Morgan such a convincing protagonist in *Red Dead 2*. Let me greet locals, polish my blaster, charge my speeder's battery, eat a meal. Probably too much to ask from the "first open-world *Star Wars* game" ever, but it's a nice thought.

Morgan Park

Pew pew, paw pew.

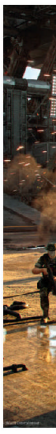
ABOVE: Get set for plenty of speeder fun.

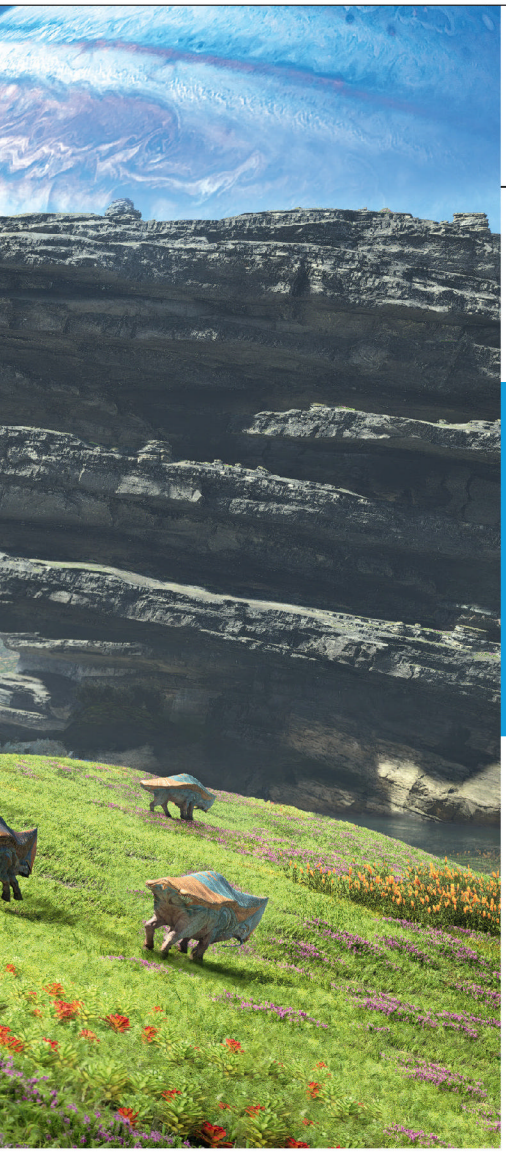
LEFT: Um, mate, you've got a hole in your chest.

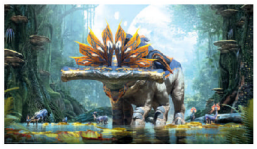
Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora

ABOVE: Riding your not-horse is fun.

RIGHT: Just popping out for the latest issue of PC PowerPlay magazine.







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
December 7, 2023	Massive Entertainment	Ubisoft	shorturl.at/dhuL6

AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

Ubisoft's *Avatar* game looks like a *Far Cry* clone so far

This might sound weird as one of PC PowerPlay's resident FPS enjoyers, but is anyone else disappointed to learn that *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* is an FPS? I always imagined running around Pandora while looking at the impressively snatched waist of a Navi, but the game we're actually getting looks much closer to *Far Cry*.

But I don't know, something felt off about the snippets of combat I saw in a behind-closed-doors look at *Avatar* at Ubisoft Forward. Guns looked generic and sounded kinda weak. At several points the player fires an RPG at an RDA walker and it just sorta topples over. The bow looks kinda fun, though I'd love to see the Navi's super alien strength expressed by, perhaps, arrowing guys so hard through the chest that they're pinned to the tree behind them. Maybe that's possible, but I didn't see it.

One part of *Avatar* that I'm almost guaranteed to enjoy: flying my banshee and riding my not-horse across the lush Pandoran forests. The first-person portions of the demo were pretty enough, but *Frontiers of Pandora* looks freaking gorgeous when the camera pulls out to third-person for traversal.

HUNTER GATHERER

I guess it's hard to get excited about an open-world *Avatar* game when I don't know what that actually entails when you're not killing things. What does an average hour of *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* look like? Hunting and gathering, for sure, but I hope there's more. I tried to prod Ubi about side activities and exploration mechanics, but they were only willing to talk about the fruit picking and cooking, which to be fair, do sound kinda interesting. Ubi says gathering is deeper than just vacuuming up resources as you walk by; you're rewarded for finding the highest quality plants or fruits in the wild, and for gathering them 'properly' without damaging the plant.

You can cook the stuff you find into meals that grant buffs, but interestingly, you'll have to experiment with ingredient combinations to discover the best recipes. Sounds a bit like recent *Zelda* games, though I doubt my Navi will hum catchy tunes while grilling up veggies. I really want to know what it's actually like to get around Pandora. Am I following a yellow waypoint or line on a map, or can I navigate the Pandoran plains with visual landmarks? That was one of my favourite parts of Ubi's *Ghost Recon Breakpoint*, so fingers crossed there.

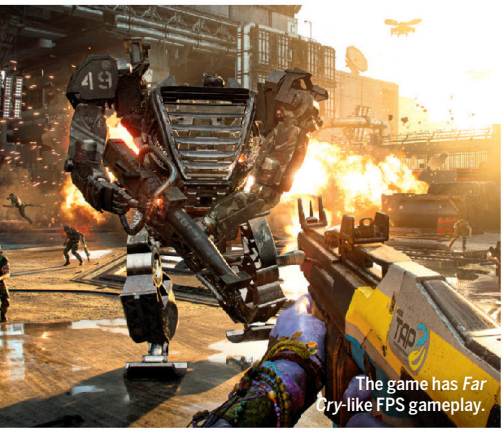
FIRST LOOK

Frontiers of Pandora largely takes place at the same time as the second Avatar movie on a different continent of Pandora, but it's the events of the first movie that kick off the game's events. You play as a Navi that was raised by humans, ordered to be killed once Jake Sully started a war, and narrowly saved and put into cryosleep for 15 years. A little convoluted, sure, but how else are you going to explain a Navi who loves to use human guns?

Don't expect the Way of Water to enter the equation, either: *Frontiers of Pandora* seems to primarily follow in the footsteps of the first movie with a predominantly forested environment. I'm not terribly impressed with what I've seen so far, but Ubi will have more opportunities to show it off in the coming months. The whole game apparently supports two-player co-op, for instance. I'd love to see that in action, because even the most milquetoast of games become instantly better with a buddy. *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* is out sooner than you'd think: December 7.

Morgan Park

LOOKS FREAKING GORGEOUS WHEN THE CAMERA PULLS OUT TO THIRD-PERSON



The game has *Far Cry*-like FPS gameplay.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
October 12, 2023	Ubisoft Bordeaux	Ubisoft	shorturl.at/cfpM0

ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

Ubisoft is making the *Assassin's Creed* I've been asking for

In a showcase that also debuted gameplay for a new Star Wars game and an Avatar FPS (see p38), I didn't expect to come away from Ubisoft's not-E3 show thinking about how gorgeous 9th century Baghdad looks in *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, how immediately charming of a protagonist Basim is, and his weirdly OP ability to teleport.

But more than anything, I'm thinking about how nice it is to be getting a classic *Assassin's Creed* game again, and wondering why Ubisoft is making it. I was one of the grumpy *AC* fans who, when *Assassin's Creed: Origins* released in 2017, was appalled at what they'd done to my stealth action series.

I've been operating under the 'believe it when I see it' principle ever since Ubi announced *Mirage*, its 'love letter' to the first *Assassin's Creed* game with glimpses of Baghdad's bustling streets and Basim's traditional robes. I was nervous that *Mirage* would still have some of the RPG baggage of the last three games, but after watching a ten-minute live demo at a press event, they've really done it: classic *Assassin's Creed*, resurrected in all its stabby, stealthy and sometimes clunky glory.

The meat of the demo is a larger assassination contract on a guy smart enough to surround himself with high walls and many guards. This is where my live demo went a little off the rails from the version Ubi published online. The demo driver almost immediately gets spotted by a guard and scrambles to hide in a bush, but it's too late. A fight breaks out in the same garden where the demo video shows off the blowdart. They barely escape the fight alive and quickly scale the tower to kill the marksman. Once he's dead, Basim can use his eagle to scout the area, though because the compound is still on alert, the eagle is quickly disabled again.

THEY ESCAPE THE FIGHT AND QUICKLY SCALE THE TOWER TO KILL THE MARKSMAN

The dev narrating the video was noticeably disappointed that the mission hadn't gone as choreographed, but I can't think of a better demonstration of *Assassin's Creed* than seeing what it's like when everything goes wrong. The early *AC* games were at their most frustrating when you were fighting clumsy controls trying to evade detection, but this is where I'm most hopeful that the snappy movement of the *AC* RPGs will rub off on *Mirage*. At least I got to see more combat than everyone else. Unlike the spongy enemies of *Origins*, *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, *Mirage* fights are quick and lethal.

FIRST LOOK

A GLASS CANNON

We saw Basim instantly counter and kill guards like the spitting image of Altaïr and Ezio, though Ubi noted that Basim is a glass cannon character. Open combat is meant to be a last resort, which has always felt like the intended fantasy of *Assassin's Creed*, but past games weren't able to resist making their protagonists into one-person armies. It'd be great to feel like I'm in real danger when facing a handful of guards, instead of waiting for easily countered attacks.

Watching the *Mirage* demo gave me all the warm fuzzy feelings remembering what it was like in the run up to the first game. I went back and watched the E3 2007 gameplay demo for *Assassin's Creed 1* afterward and was surprised at the little things I'd forgotten about that game that felt so novel at the time, like a dedicated button to push crowds away, the freedom to climb the side of any building and hidden blade kills that are still cool 16 years later.

There might never be a proper *AC* remake, but I'm starting to think *Mirage* is something better: a modern reimagining of what that first game could've been on a much grander scale.

Morgan Park

Basim going to extreme lengths to steal an apple.

ABOVE: Open combat is meant to be a last resort in *Mirage*.

LEFT: Basim is described by the developers as a glass cannon.

BALDUR'S FATE

After more than two decades, the wait is finally over. **BALDUR'S GATE III** is here and, as Robert Jones discovers, it's changing the scope of what an CRPG can offer forever

By Robert Jones

The wonder of Candlekeep and Imoen. Gorion's fall. Recruiting the heroic Jaheira, Khalid, Minsc and many more. The wind-swept beauty of the Sword Coast. Deep in the mines of Nashkel. Cloakwood. Baldur's Gate, the City of Blood. Sorcerous Sundries. Sarevok and the Temple of Bhaal. Dreaming deep. Waking in Athkatla, the City of Coin. Khalid's tragedy. Dancing with the Shadow Thieves. Boo, Edwin, Bodhi and others. Yoshimo's duel with fate. The de'Arnise Keep. Spellhold. Dreaming deeper. The horrors of the Underdark. Suldanessellar's majesty. Fighting elven mage Jon Irenicus in hell. Walking the planes. Choosing whether to sit on the throne of Bhaal or destroy it.

Fragments of a story from the past, drifting out of memory slowly for decades, resting in shadow until the chance arrives to be reborn under the Great Wheel...

Today, in 2023, my initial experience of the *Baldur's Gate* series rests in my mind as a selection of distant but memorable, beautiful moments. Whatever bad experiences I had with the series when originally

playing it over 20 years ago are now scrubbed from my mind, leaving only the series' epic, poetic, heroic tales told in fragmentary form. Memorable characters, events and quotes surface and then fade, but recreating that initial new experience of questing in its world, as millions of PC gamers had back in the late 1990s and early 2000s, has been beyond reach.

And, aside from a brief foray back to Faerûn's Sword Coast in the belated *Siege of Dragonspear* expansion pack, despite being such a legendary CRPG series, *Baldur's Gate* has felt distant as of late, as its stories start to slip from memory and the impact it once had on PC gaming appearing diminished by the passage of time. It's easy to forget these things, after all, as even counting from when *Baldur's Gate II*'s story comes to an end in its *Throne of Bhaal* expansion pack, released in 2001, it has been over 22 years since. That's plenty of time for PC gamers to dream of a third entry in the *Baldur's Gate* series, then forget about it entirely.

Maybe *Baldur's Gate II* antagonist Jon Irenicus described this sense of passing time, forgetting and loss best... "I... I do not remember your love, Ellesime. I have tried. I have tried to recreate it, to spark it anew in my memory, but it is gone... a hollow, dead thing. For years, I clung to the memory of it. Then the memory of the memory. And then nothing."

TREADING CAREFULLY, I PICK MY WAY THROUGH THE CURSED FOREST, DARKNESS AND SHADOWS CLOSING IN

WAKING FROM A DREAM

Treading carefully, I pick my way through the cursed forest located within the Sword Coast's Western Heartlands, darkness and shadows closing in on me from all sides oppressively. I hold a glowing magic lantern, acquired from a creature who died in a bad way, above my head and, while its light lasts, my party and I can venture forth without being taken by the darkness.

Finally, we arrive at our destination, a Harper stronghold deep within the darkness. This is a key waypoint on our way to Moonrise Towers, home to General Ketheric Thorm, a follower of the Absolute who is responsible for releasing the blighted shadow curse across this region. Walking through the gates of the Harpers' compound, built around a coaching inn, I'm immediately confronted though by a series of armed Harpers, who block my progress. And then, out of the dark entranceway of the building, a very familiar old face emerges into the light.

Moments later and Jaheira is standing before me and, regardless of the fact that she doesn't seem too pleased to see me right now, it is as pure a piece of magic as you can get in gaming. It's something that feels unreal, as if in a dream, as for a long, long time I never thought I would see her character again. But here, with a sword held at my throat, is the famous half-elf hero of *Baldur's Gate* and, if I play my cards right, a future companion to adventure with as I progress to the Gray Harbor, the famous City of Blood, in Larian Studio's long-awaited *Baldur's Gate III*.

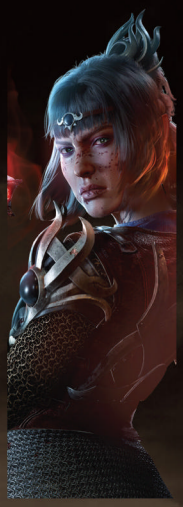
What's most interesting about my meeting here with Jaheira, though, is that it might never have happened at all. Indeed, due to how *Baldur's Gate III* has been crafted by Larian, there was a frighteningly large chance that, like ships in the night, we would pass each other by. And, even if I did stand here before the great half-elf in another life, I might have done so as anyone and with anyone, and for myriad reasons, too. For in *Baldur's Gate III*, reactivity rules.

GATHER YOUR PARTY

I'm in Larian Studio's headquarters in Ghent, Belgium, and sat either side of me while I meet with Jaheira are two of the vast team of game devs who are delivering the long-awaited third act in the *Baldur's Gate* series, two

LEFT: The legendary half-elf hero Jaheira returns in *Baldur's Gate III*.

ABOVE: Wild Magic can have some interesting results. Sheep sorcerer anyone?



key figures who are bringing *Baldur's Gate III* to gamers worldwide.

Those devs are Larian Studios' founder and creative director Swen Vincke, as well as lead writer for the game Adam Smith, and they've been venturing forth with me as part of my party as we run through *Baldur's Gate III* in multiplayer. I'm playing a dragonborn sorcerer, Smith is a drow monk, Vincke is a githyanki sorcerer, and rounding out our party of four we've got just-revealed-to-me new *Baldur's Gate III* character Karlach, an asmodeus tiefling barbarian powered by a mechanical heart. Yeah, Karlach is as awesome as she sounds.

Reactivity is a word I'll hear a lot speaking to Vincke and Smith, but specifically Larian's founder, who has a gleam in his eyes when talking about the web of interconnected choices, events, characters and actions that make up *Baldur's Gate III*, and how the game works with the player to tell their story.

'There's a design principle behind this. You'll discover it when you play *Baldur's Gate III*, the replay value is very high – everything is connected. There's not a single thing that's not connected to the main plot. You get different perspectives, and that's what the fun is.

"Your colleagues will have completely different adventures, I guarantee you. It'll be really strange if you had the same experience because there's so many permutations. But you will all be aware of what's going on. You will all be aware of, 'Hey, this is why we're doing this.' You'll be motivated. You'll understand your central problems. You'll also understand who the central bad guys are in the universe.

"You'll be going in different routes, but they'll be connected. For instance, if you're going to become Lae'zel, you'll be looking at the point of view of an evil goddess that doesn't like what's going on. But if you're Shadowheart, you might be looking at it through the eyes of a goddess from Baldur's Gate that has a different opinion on it. If you're Karlach, though, you're going to

CASTING CALL

Meet just a few of Baldur's Gate III's *potential new companions*

ASTARION
A high elf rogue who, as players quickly discover, is also a vampire. He's centuries old and has a voice like silk. Can he be trusted?

LAE'ZEL
A fierce githyanki fighter who worships the deity Vlaakith. She hunts mind flayers in order to prove herself worthy of honour.

SHADOWHEART
A high half-elf cleric and also one of the deity Shar's dark disciples, she possesses an item of great power and a long-buried secret.

GALE
A human wizard who wants to be the most powerful magic user in Faerûn. He has a Netherese Destruction Orb lodged in his chest.

WYLL
Wyll is a human noble by birth, but now, thanks to a pact with a demon, is a warlock, something he tries to keep hidden at all costs.

KARLACH
An asmodeous tiefling, Karlach is a barbarian warrior who was forced to fight in the demonic Blood War. She wants freedom.

be looking at it from a point of view like, 'One of those motherfuckers put me in hell!'

"If you're a custom character, you're going to be defining the role, and you'll see that even there, the game reacts. If you're a druid, if you're a cleric, if you're a drow, if you're a githyanki – the game has individual reactivity, and gives you perspective, and incentivises you to go do things because of who you are, and what your identity is.

"If you're a githyanki druid, for example, it's likely that the druids will let you pass through certain things. You'll learn things that you would otherwise not learn. And when you meet githyanki, they're going to consider you one of them. So they'll give you options that you would not get elsewhere and it will send you on adventures that the others might not find. That's the beauty of it."

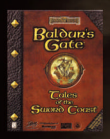
Gamers are often promised heavenly in-game reactivity, specifically in terms of RPGs, but many only end up offering that layered depth, that ability to alter the story being told on the fly, in a really rather shallow way, ultimately funnelling or restricting players in how they progress through a game. It's an illusion of freedom and, yes, sure, there are limits to how reactive *Baldur's Gate III* can be as a game, but I think it is going to take you a very, very long time to see those barriers. It was quite dizzying, as well as incredibly cool, to hear just how interconnected and reactive everything you do in *Baldur's Gate III* is, and also just how unprecious and uncontrolling Larian is being with the vast amounts of content it has created.

Here's an example. Early in my play session with Vincke and Smith, a portal materialises in a nearby wall and a hand reaches out of it while a voice asks for assistance in making it through. This is a player's first interaction with wizard companion Gale. The thing is, though, I'm playing a dragonborn character who suffers

THE BALDUR'S GATE CRPG TIMELINE

Follow the series' numerous releases on PC

BALDUR'S GATE 1998
The original *Baldur's Gate* was developed by BioWare, creating a new benchmark for fantasy CRPGs and selling incredibly well.



BALDUR'S GATE: TALES OF THE SWORD COAST 1999
An expansion pack that introduces new locations, quests and UI improvements is released.

BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN 2000
BioWare makes a sequel set in and around Athkatla, a city in the country of Amn. It's a stone-cold classic.

BALDUR'S GATE II: THRONE OF BHAAL 2001
An expansion that adds an expanded conclusion to the main story, as well as new characters, spells and more.

BALDUR'S GATE: ENHANCED EDITION 2012
Beamdog creates an upgraded and improved version of the original, with its expansion pack included.

BALDUR'S GATE II: ENHANCED EDITION 2013
Beamdog repeats its trick with *Baldur's Gate II*, creating an upgraded version of the hit sequel.

BALDUR'S GATE: SIEGE OF DRAGONSPEAR 2016
A totally new expansion from Beamdog, filling in the story between *BG I* and *II*.

BALDUR'S GATE III 2023
Larian Studios, made famous with its superb *Divinity: Original Sin* series of CRPGs, picks up the series' reins and develops *Baldur's Gate III*.

from what the game calls The Dark Urge, which in common parlance means I'm a bit mad, with voices in my head urging me to perform unspeakable acts. I choose to succumb to The Dark Urge and, right then and there, before I've even seen any more of Gale than just his hand, I decide to gnaw his hand off and keep it as a bloody souvenir. There's screaming, plenty of blood, and the portal closes. And that's Gale gone from my story.

And the game then reacts to my choice. Whatever potential Gale could have had to the entire story I'm about to embark on, is now not part of the equation. Despite Larian Studios creating hours and hours of content with Gale, recording his dialogue, crafting interactions with him, shaping potential romances, developing potential interactions between him and other NPCs and companions and quests, it doesn't matter. But, the really interesting thing is, some players might not ever even find Gale's portal at all, or maybe they'll decide to play directly as Gale, or maybe they'll welcome him into their group and then never actually add him to the party. Or maybe they will add him, but due to who they are as the player character, or who is in their party, Gale will affect any number of other variables.

I CHOOSE TO SUCCUMB TO THE DARK URGE, AND DECIDE TO GNAW HIS HAND OFF AND KEEP IT AS A BLOODY SOUVENIR

"The trick is that it always works," adds Vincke, when talking about *Baldur's Gate III*'s reactive storytelling. "We've spent six years making sure that each individual bit of story connects to one another. So regardless of how you go through it, it will always make sense to you. You will always know where you're going. You will always have your unique experience to tell. But it will be rooted in your identity of who you are, and what you wanted to be when you started out, and the initial position you find yourself in. You'll end up either the ruler of the Forgotten Realms, or the saviour of the Forgotten Realms, or something in between. There might be a whole bunch of other stuff that is attached to that, depending on what you did, and who you had, with allies you found, and so forth."

WRITING HISTORY

If you were to ask me what made the original *Baldur's Gate* series so memorable, I'd say its writing more than any one other thing, despite its immense quality elsewhere. Some of the most memorable lines in any CRPG ever come in those first two *Baldur's Gate* games, so with the level of reactivity on offer in *Baldur's Gate III*, naturally getting the writing on point for its vast cast of characters is something that feels critical. This is where Smith is in his element, though, and regales me with how he has overseen the game's dialogue, which is an ever-present aspect of the game's 174 hours of cutscenes, let alone what's directly in the game, too.

"The player character is the most important character in the game," Smith stresses about crafting story and dialogue for an RPG. "It doesn't matter who I want to tell you about. It doesn't matter how cool I think my story is. If you're not in the story, then it's not as cool a story. So the player character is number one. This is my theory of crafting. It starts from character creation. The story's already started, because what we're doing is looking at what you do there. We're looking at which race you pick, which class you pick – which background you picked, to a smaller extent, on this one, because we let you craft that as the game goes on.

"So we see that, and we say, 'OK, now we know a little bit more about your story.' We don't know the whole story yet, but we know a little bit more about it. 'Are you a drow, or are you a human, or are you a halfling?'

TOP LEFT: Yes, be prepared to potentially face the horrors of the Underdark.

LEFT: "Minsc will be free! These bonds will not hold my wrath!"

WELCOME TO THE CITY OF BALDUR'S GATE

The metropolis has been lovingly recreated by Larian Studios

LANDMARKS
Famous city landmarks, such as the Ducal Palace, Sorcerous Sundries, and the Temple of Helm remain intact despite the lengthy passage of time since our last visit.

DISTRICTS
The original *Baldur's Gate* game presented the grand city in nine separate districts. Those districts remain in *Baldur's Gate III*, but they are now all seamlessly interconnected together.

POPULATION
The city of Baldur's Gate is teeming with life, and every single person (and animal if you have the ability to) in the metropolis can be spoken with. The city is densely packed.
BUILDINGS
Every building within the city can be entered in *Baldur's Gate III*, and they are populated with a myriad of city inhabitants. There are no fake doors on empty shells or loading zones.

That, we remember. The game remembers because it's built in there. But we remember it as storytellers as well, and we say, 'OK, what is the expectation here? If you're playing a drow then people are going to react to you like a drow, because that was your story.'

"You don't need to pick those options. Sometimes the characters are going to pick them. But you could also say, 'I'm going to carry on telling a drow story here, and maybe my drow story is one where I'm the outsider drow who doesn't go with all this.' Maybe your tiefling story is, 'I sympathise with my fellow tieflings.' But maybe your tiefling story is, 'I don't give a damn about these tieflings in the grove.'

"But you're telling that story of that character. So that character you're telling us you're playing as – for us, we need to remember everything that you're telling us about who you are; how you act in the world; and then we log that, and we say, 'OK, what is this character?' Now, you'll see the bits where you very obviously have it in the gameplay. But there's also the bits where maybe something went wrong, and something didn't go as you planned it to. That becomes part of your story as well, and that's building up the history of who your character is."

The writing I've experienced so far in *Baldur's Gate III* hits the nail on the head, with dialogue that captures the essence of the series, managing to deftly switch between epic, gut-wrenching and laugh-out-loud funny. Without spoiling anything, my sides split when talking to a certain cat, and I was constantly amused by Karlach's subtlety-free, brutally honest communication style, while listening to characters like Astarion is something I could do all day. Regardless of who you adventure with in *Baldur's Gate III*, you're in for a wild ride.

There was one character in particular that caught my attention, one that is ever-present regardless of your journey – the narrator. This is interesting, because unlike almost any RPG I can think off, the narrator talks directly to you, as if within your head, giving you insight and perspective, reliable or otherwise, into not just your own mental state but also other characters, locations and events.

Smith reveals Larian's thinking here: "You can't play D&D without a DM. And you would struggle to play our game without a narrator. You have many types of DM in D&D, the ones who are constantly rolling dice behind a screen, the ones who are going to explain the rules to you over and over again., and the ones who really just want to tell you a story. So there's a lot of playfulness. It's a really fun character to write."

TURN-BASED D&D TACTICS

Where *Baldur's Gate III* has moved in an arguably even more authentic way towards the D&D 5e ruleset that underpins its gameplay, is in combat, which is turn-based. To be clear, you can enter a turn-based state at any time, even out of combat, but when it's time for steel on steel, gameplay becomes turn-based, with the typical D&D rules of movement, action and bonus action adhered to. And you need to be switched on not to get your butt well and truly kicked in *Baldur's Gate III*, as the AI in this game, even on regular difficulty, will use all the systems and options available to it.

I ask Vincke about this after we have one of our party's characters pushed into a chasm by an NPC, noting that I'm getting strong *XCOM* vibes from many encounters, and once more with a gleam in his eye, Vincke is very open about how Larian has approached combat.

"We want you to die," he notes. "We want you to die because dying forces you to think about how to use the

A TRIPLE THREAT

Meet **Baldur's Gate III's** *primary antagonists*

GENERAL KETHERIC THORM

A follower of the Absolute who, after taking up residence in Moonrise Towers, has released a shadow curse

LORD ENVER GORTASH

A politician who has become Baldur's Gate's leader. He is the creator of the Steel Watchers, magical clockwork warriors.

ORIN

The mysterious third antagonist of *Baldur's Gate III*, Orin is a shapechanger with immense magical power. She is at war with Enver Gortash. Why? No one knows.

systems, and that's where your engagement comes from. This game is the translation of the Player's Handbook. We made it – if we did our jobs properly – in an approachable manner, so that people understand that you don't have to think a lot about rules. You just click on stuff.

But it's that sort of potential creativity in combat, that ability to think outside the box, which I know that I and many other PC gamers love. That ability to, say, cast the spell Grease under a group of enemies and then throw a flaming torch onto it, setting all enemies on fire instead of just attacking one. Or the ability to set up an ambush with explosive barrels, lure a tough enemy into them, then hitting a barrel with a flaming arrow. Or creeping up on enemies in high places, pushing them off to their deaths, and then using the high ground to get enhanced bonuses on ranged attacks. There are so many possibilities.

A LANDMARK RPG

It's hard to communicate the sense of awe I was left with after playing and seeing *Baldur's Gate III* in person, guided through roughly 12 hours of what is on offer in a title that, even on an average player runthrough, Larian Studios estimates will offer a 70 to 100-hour experience, and north of 200 hours for hardcore players.

The astonishing number of layers of reactivity built into *Baldur's Gate III*, though, means that each and every time a gamer plays this game they will have a different experience. Yes, the core story remains a driver that all players will interact with, but even that has an incredible amount of variables in play, meaning everyone will have different stories to tell.

My mind was left flayed thinking about the almost scary openness of this game, an openness that allows players to play how they want and choose what they want to do at a super-granular, reactive level. This game, for all its incredible craft in its systems, mechanics, locations, characters and story, is not precious about any of them. Hardly anything is straitjacketed and barely anything seems off limits.

"IF WE DID OUR JOBS PROPERLY YOU DON'T HAVE TO THINK A LOT ABOUT RULES. YOU JUST CLICK ON STUFF"

Choice truly is king in *Baldur's Gate III*, in a way that I've never experienced before in gaming, and that extends through its every facet, from how you design, spec and equip your character, to what companions you discover, take with you or kill, who you romance and how, what quests you discover or take and how you choose to play them out, how and if you discover the consequences of your actions on that previous quest, how to tackle each and every fight tactically, how you involve yourself in interactions between companions, how you get to a certain destination, and when to even travel to Baldur's Gate and engage, one way or another, in a story that has major implications for all of Faerûn. The possibilities are dizzying when you start to think about them.

How *Baldur's Gate III* will be received by critics remains unknown at the time of writing. However, there is one thing that I do know after playing the game and hearing about the journey Vincke, Smith and the Larian team have been on for six years – RPGs are about to be changed forever with *Baldur's Gate III*. The reactivity to player choice this game offers, regardless of anything else, makes it a landmark moment in the history of gaming and, just like its esteemed series forebears were all those years ago, it is going to be a new benchmark that all subsequent CRPGs will be measured against.

So, to quote the legendary *Baldur's Gate* ranger Minsc himself... Make way villainy, hero coming through! ■

TOP LEFT: Gale wants to become the greatest wizard Faerûn has ever seen.

LEFT: Every animal in the game can be spoken with, providing you have the ability to do so of course.

DOOM GUY

PC PowerPlay talks to industry legend **JOHN ROMERO** about his life in videogames

By Robert Jones

Doom creator and FPS pioneer John Romero is PC gaming royalty. His career in the videogame industry is incredibly storied, too, with dizzying highs and some hellish lows. For the first time, though, Romero is telling his own entire story in his new autobiography, Doom Guy, from his early childhood learning to code, through to the exciting new FPS he's working on in 2023.

PC PowerPlay: Is it fair to say that a fear of being left behind was a key motivator for you when learning to code as a child?
John Romero: Yeah. The feeling that I was behind the curve, was when I really recognised early on that I loved making games, and I really loved programming. Because game development in the early '80s was so solitary, and it was something that... I didn't know anyone else that did it. There were so few people doing it back then.

So I just looked up to those programming heroes of mine, and just tried to create animations and techniques that would be quality enough, and then, really, it comes down to design. You know, coming up with a design that people would really like, or that I would really like, mostly.

PCPP: Recalling making games in the 1980s, you say that, "Finding another game programmer at the time was like a needle in a haystack." That's obviously a culture that is hugely different from today. Can you expand on that?
JR: Yeah – especially when I was first starting out in the early '80s. There was nobody else. When I got to high school, there was a little computer club, and so I did meet some other people who were interested in programming, and they weren't very good at it, but they were interested in it. And they like being around computers. I was actually making games. I was learning as much as I could, as fast as I could. So I was already ahead of them.

But when it came to getting far more advanced with assembly language, and that kind of commercial development, there was nobody at all around. Also, back in the '80s, it was hard to find books of information to learn how to make games, even. There were books on how to programme in assembly language on different computers. But programming games was: you know, have fun finding those books.

It was really, really difficult back then. There was no internet. There were no notifications. There was no social media. There was no communicating with other people, really, that much. So finding books was critical.

PCPP: Something that is very clear in the book is the furious pace of innovation in game making in both the 1980s and the 1990s, with some of the absolutely biggest and most pioneering coming from studios like id, and specifically on *Doom*. Did you ever stop and think at the time, "We're on the absolute cutting edge here, this is the future"?
JR: Yeah. At multiple instances, I knew that was happening, knowing that [what we were doing] has never been seen before on a PC. "We need to do something with that ourselves. We can't trust that the company that we're at is going to do something with that."

> **"WE WERE JUST TRYING TO DO THE BEST THING THAT WE COULD WITH THE GAME"**

And so we were not thinking about, "We're really pioneering something." Like, with *Doom*, so much happened with *Doom*. Not just the shareware distribution that we had already been doing for a while, since 1990, but getting our game on the shelves with software distributors that were already putting stuff on shelves.

Doom was the first game with modding – having an open date format that makes modding easy, so people can make the game what they want, and giving people the information to create their own levels. Like, what the level format is.

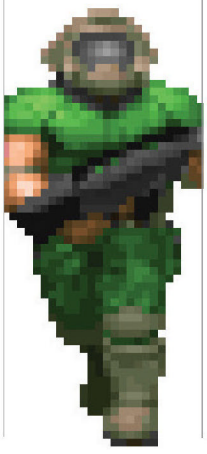
Speed running started with *Doom*. Even though the first game that we made in 1990 even had demo recording and playback, it wasn't accessible to people. We didn't actually make landline options to let people do that. But if we had, speed running would have started three years earlier. We had that in all our games before *Doom*. You were watching demos happen in the games. Those are all the same thing – it's the same as playing it back. And multiplayer for the first time – playing deathmatch, and blowing somebody else up in a game at high speed. Never had that happened before. That was so critical to games at that point. The design of the game, the darkness, the music – just the design of it was new.

Getting rid of lives and getting rid of score, which were arcade holdovers – because those were for quarter poppers. And this game was not about that.

There were so many things that *Doom* did. We weren't thinking that we were pioneering. We were just trying to do the best thing that we could with the game that we were making, because *Doom* was the very first time that we said, "We need to make this game the best thing that we could imagine playing."

PCPP: My perception of you from outside is that you are and were John Romero the genius creative designer, and that is what you really only wanted to do. However, after reading Doom Guy, I was blown away by just how involved you were in so many other things, from striking deals, to PR, to building installers and level editors, to helping program on engines and even getting stuck into the business aspects. Is that floating role where you think you worked best and had most fun?
JR: Yeah. You know, it was a really, really busy time, and there was a lot to do. We're doing a lot of new things. We had a very small team. When we started making *Doom*, there were only five of us, and to make a game like that, I needed to do more.

With a team that small, Jay was great as our biz guy. But when journalists would come, and they would want to know about the art of the game, the design of the game, about the engine, and even, really, business stuff – it was more effective, I think, if we didn't have the whole office interrupted, and it was just me who was being interrupted to do these interviews. Because I could speak to all of that stuff.



And, you know, with a small team, it's great. That's why indie teams are so much fun. With less people, you learn more. And you do more. And you're more effective. That's what it's been about. I've been an indie pretty much my whole life.

PCPP: You recount the famous split between yourself and John Carmack at id in the book. What came across to me reading it was that you two worked together perfectly, and complemented each other perfectly, too, in a way that is incredibly rare. Were you aware of that before the split and, if you weren't, do you think being aware of your chemistry could have prevented the spit?

JR: You know, I knew how well we were together from the first time we started working together, which was really amazing. When we started... when I hired him, and he joined the Gamer's Edge team, and we needed to make a game each in one month – we needed to make two games in one month for a demo disc.

That was so intense, to do an entire game in one month that would show off a product, and make people want to pay money for it. It was important that we did really well, doing that.

So we started in August 1, just basically working like crazy together, even though we weren't on the same product, we were in the same room. And I could tell that his intensity and his focus was just like mine.

We just worked incredibly well together. We were so in sync for years. That's why we made so many games. In 1991, we made 13 games that year. It was awesome, you know? We could totally push each other. There were no limits on what we could do. So we're making *Quake* the first true 3D game, in high framerate, with perspective-correct texture mapping. We were just so far ahead tech-wise and design-wise, we just kept on going. We just kept on doing what we did best, working together.

PCPP: Speaking of *Quake*, that task of John Carmack building an entire new engine from scratch, almost entirely on his own, seems absolutely crazy to me. In retrospect, was it too crazy, considering it was a key driver in you leaving id?

JR: First, I've got to say: nothing is crazy for Carmack. He's the greatest game programmer that the game industry has ever seen. We just didn't know how long it was going to take to make that engine. He was absolutely able to make that engine. He's able to make anything that he wants to make. It's just time. It's a matter of time. Even with his current endeavours, he's going to do it. It's just going to take a little bit more time to do it.

But, yeah, the goal of *Quake* – the technology goal of *Quake* – was an Everest. It was huge. In talking to John, while making the book, and just kind of going over the factors that made us break as a team and go our separate ways – you know, we were young, and we knew that... We know now that we really could have done several other things to preserve what we had. My idea – my feeling was that, "Well, we could just have another team making games, using the *Doom II* engine, while John is spending time researching the *Quake* engine, and making it. That would have kept us, as a team, creating, and also making the next level of stuff.

> "THE GOAL OF QUAKE – THE TECHNOLOGY GOAL OF QUAKE – WAS AN EVEREST"

When I was talking to John while writing this book, he said we could have taken the technology advancements that we put into *Quake*, and just done two games instead of one game. We could have made the game, you know, internet-playable first. We could have had some of those advancements, like in the mouse-look advancement.

We could have had some of that stuff in there first, in a *Doom* tech-level game, and then we could have done full 3D in the next game after that. So it was split up among products, and the whole team would have been working together on those things, and it wouldn't have taken so long. It is kind of funny, though, thinking about the fact that a year-and-a-half was really just nuts for us as a company to be making an engine. That's nothing. That amount of time is nothing. But for us, it was eternity, because we operated at such a high framerate as a company.

PCPP: You recount Ion Storm in fascinating detail in the book, and take full responsibility for events that transpired. From my reading you made some bad decisions, definitely, but also were engulfed in a storm that at times I felt you were almost powerless to navigate.

JR: Yeah. I mean, there are a lot of things that happen in game development, and in people's lives. Sometimes you're presented with tough problems, you know, when there aren't any really good solutions. I really did the best I could do. Sometimes that was really good, and sometimes it wasn't.

But I don't know that I was really powerless. Ultimately, I'm the ones who made the decisions that got me to that point. And so it's my fault if things don't go well.

And definitely with Ion Storm, when I did take action, you know, and my team decided to leave, or people were upset – that's on me. Looking back, it would have turned out differently if I'd started out differently with Ion Storm.

I wanted to see what I could do with more games. I had hoped for a company that could be like, in software, team-size small, but multiple games at the same time, to see how that would go, and different genres. But, yeah, it was definitely an experiment.

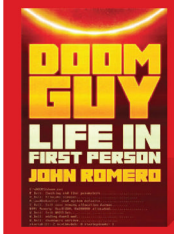
Overall, I've been very fortunate in games, and I really did learn a lot from that experience.

PCPP: Finally, your book finishes with mention of two tantalising new projects coming down the line from Romero Games, the first is *SIGIL II*, which is being released on *Doom*'s 30th anniversary this year, and second, a brand new FPS backed by a major studio. Well, I've got to ask, is there anything else you can say right now about that new shooter?

JR: We're using Unreal 5, which is really great. It's great technology, and I think a really interesting design. But I can't really say much more than that. ■

LEAVING ID

Extract from Doom Guy, recalling the split between John Romero and John Carmack



I left id on August 6, 1996. Under the terms of our buy-sell agreement, I returned my stock to id Software immediately, and they paid me for it over the next five years. The stock price was calculated based on the collective sales the company had made over the previous 365 days multiplied by my percentage of ownership – for every dollar sold, I got a percentage. I'm grateful for the work I put into releasing products during *Quake*'s long development as it meant that there was company income to have a percentage of. I couldn't have known it at the time, but my desire to expand the business's bottom line and to ensure its security ended up ensuring mine. As it turned out, I saw no money from *Quake*.

Despite our team's fractured state, our arguments, and our overall solemnity, there is this undeniable fact: the incredible discipline we had as a team allowed us to create and publish thirty-two games in six years. Something malevolently magical happened between us, and I believe that my creative drive was the heart of Carmack's machine. We changed the world for the better.

As I write this, a quarter century has passed since I left id. Throughout the last couple of chapters, I mentioned that I would share some thoughts on what we might have done differently with *Quake*, with our divergent company strategies, and with our eventual irreconcilable differences. We* know it didn't have to go as it did. Of course, that's the benefit of both maturity and hindsight.

**Here, "We" refers to Carmack and Romero.*

TOP: The iconic artwork from *Doom II*.

LEFT: Building the engine for *Quake* took a year-and-a-half.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Hail Lilith!

So, after all the waiting and hype, the closed and open betas, the Server Slam testing and the last-minute reveals, *Diablo IV* is finally with us. The Mother of Sanctuary, Lilith, walks the Earth once more, and PC gamers across the world are furiously clicking their way to heaven and hell.

As our detailed review this issue shows, the wait for *Diablo IV* has in many ways been absolutely worth it, too. *Diablo IV* is a great game that returns the series to its tonally dark origins, while also evolving what *Diablo* is as a videogame series, with a noticeable shift toward MMO and live service.

Not everything Blizzard has done will sit right with every PC gamer, that's for sure, but overall it's hard not to be enthralled by Lilith's return.

Contents

58 Diablo IV
62 **Mask of the Rose**
64 The Lord of the Rings: Gollum
66 **Hrot**
68 Park Beyond
72 **Lego 2K Drive**

FREE GAMES

74 Ravenhaul
75 **Crimson Fantasia**
75 Neo City Express

This month's Lilith-worshipping reviewers...

TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Serving Lilith
Currently playing
Diablo IV
This month
Decided to up sticks to the Burning Hells for a new job. Took plenty of factor 50.

JOSHUA WOLENS
Specialist in
Victorian Tinder
Currently playing
Mask of the Rose
This month
Courted a series of eligible romantic suitors while solving a murder mystery.

DOMINIC TARASON
Specialist in
The precious
Currently playing
TLotR: Gollum
This month
Focused on the precious. Stroked the precious. Whispered to the precious.

TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Unspeakable horrors
Currently playing
Amnesia: The Bunker
This month
Played hide and seek with an ape-like, bestial monster that lives in walls.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Lip wobbling
Currently playing
Spiritfarer
This month
Discovered the afterlife involves chipper, supportive frog men. How nice!

LIVING HELL

Fiery builds and lots of skeletons in the fantastical darkness of DIABLO IV

By Tyler Colp

D*iablo IV* tries to ground us in its dark fantasy world, but that's an impossible task in a game where you can pull a two-handed axe out of a wolf. The storytelling is as subtle as a Marvel film and about five times as long. No matter what *Diablo IV*'s cast of characters tell you, you're just a superhero born with an empty inventory and the desire to fill it.

The title of Blizzard's latest action RPG hides what's really going on: *Diablo IV* is a reboot. An unnecessary reboot, but one with a recognisable goal: to reconfigure the series' strengths into a modern live service format that fits into the lives of players who probably have a handful of other games to play. Once you finish its campaign, its glorious depth reveals itself, but the overwhelming grind restrains the creativity in its intricate RPG systems.

Today's prevailing live-service structure might seem to be a good fit for *Diablo*'s replayable co-op design, but it actually requires a huge structural shift. *Diablo IV* begins like a story-driven adventure, but it's not until you finish the campaign that its best parts start to unfold.

MISERY BUSINESS

Blizzard's reaction to complaints that *Diablo III* wasn't dark enough led to something so bleak it's suffocating. While the campaign focuses on the growing threat of Lilith, the Mother of Sanctuary, the sidequests offer different flavours of misery. Almost every character you meet does something awful, like betraying their own children, making a pact with demons, or murdering someone over a petty dispute. I've helped so many people find their dead family members that I stopped listening out for NPC requests.

Once you finish the campaign, its glorious depth reveals itself

The thematic 'return to darkness', or return to *Diablo II*, that *Diablo IV* promises only works when that horror meaningfully affects how you play. One early dungeon set in a monastery had me chasing after a lead on Lilith. I expected demons and dead monks but what I found were eerily empty hallways. In the distance I heard doors slam shut and screaming. Instead of yet another dungeon where you fight through nameless enemies to find your target at the end, I was stalking a murderer just out of my reach. The urgency, with nothing but the sound of my footsteps echoing through the halls, made for one of *Diablo IV*'s most chilling sequences.

That sort of upending of expectations is rare to find in *Diablo IV*'s quests, though. Much of it is held back for the endgame in features like Helltide events, which blanket a portion of the map in blood (literally) and supercharge all the demons there. You get one hour to kill as many as you can to collect their Aberrant Cinder drops and open as many rare item chests as you can without dying.

EVERY CLASS A PAINTING

The six-act campaign sends you around Estuar trying to stop Lilith from opening a portal to Hell. A few boss encounters, like a surprise fight with one of *Diablo*'s signature lesser evils in the middle of a sandstorm, stand out because of their significance to the story. Several of these fights are undercut by forgettable MMO-like mechanics that force you to dodge out of highlighted shapes on the ground until you win. It's not until way after the campaign that you encounter bosses that pose enough of a threat to require a strong understanding of your class to defeat.

After finally finishing *Diablo IV*'s campaign, I was let loose in its open world with all sorts of loot-hunting activities to do. Dungeons get harder and the game starts to require that you squeeze as much damage as you can out of your class, a targeted attack on my character-build-obsessed brain.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A loot-filled action RPG in a Hellish world

EXPECT TO PAY
$84

DEVELOPER
Blizzard

PUBLISHER
Activision Blizzard

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 12900K, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Four-player co-op

LINK
diablo4.blizzard.com

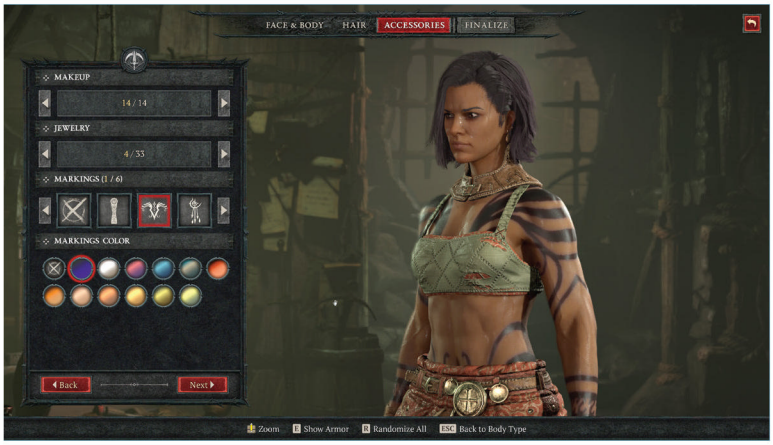
THE BUTCHER RETURNS

Diablo IV*'s iconic boss is equipped to kill you*

1 HOOK
Every time you think you're safe, he pulls you back in. Ranged classes know the pain.

2 HORNS
In *Diablo IV*, the Butcher can ram into you for heavy damage.

3 BONE
The worst part about the Butcher is that he lives for the hunt. That leg there could be yours if you aren't careful.



FAR LEFT: The character creator has loads of options.

BELOW: Hell still looks like a metal album cover.

FAR RIGHT: There's a wide boss variety and some are brutal.

BELOW: Every class feels exceptionally distinct.

Diablo IV's skill tree single-handedly keeps me from thinking too hard about the treadmill underneath my feet. Not since *Elden Ring* has my YouTube recommendation page been filled with commands to try this broken build or to use this OP item before it's too late. All five classes – Barbarian, Druid, Rogue, Sorceress and Necromancer – are substantially different from each other despite sharing the same hack-and-slash job.

Mere seconds after you're dropped into the Fractured Peaks, you kill a few wolves, level up, and earn your first skill point – an exciting moment of possibility that the game won't stop giving you until you start to near its level 100 cap. Skill points and their eventual successor, Paragon points, are the dangling carrots that keep you clicking for hours and hours, long after you've seen everything your class can do. It's still ridiculously satisfying to plan out your build and then strategically spend your hard-earned points.

I started as a Necromancer, a chauffeur of an army of skeletons, standing in place and shooting piercing bone spears while my boney buddies pulverised my foes. This method worked perfectly fine for hours but, ever build-curious, I spent a sizeable amount of gold to rework my approach. I went from the commander of an undead army to a god imbued with the power of my sacrificed demons and loads of critical strike rating. I am an engine that runs on the corpses of my enemies. Tendrils sprout out of their remains, yanking the demons right into my ricocheting bone spears that now deal so much damage that I only need to cast a few before everything is dead.

Once you have an idea for how you want to play your class, chances are the skill tree has a path for you to get there. If you want to go all in on bone spears, you can find tons of skills that layer on top of their basic effects or set them up to deal ridiculous amounts of damage. Legendary aspects, which are earned by completing dungeons or finding Legendary items, modify this even further with unique effects. One of my rings causes my bone spear to do 100% extra damage on enemies who I've made Vulnerable. With the Plagued Corpse Tendrils skill, every enemy pulled in by it becomes Vulnerable for three seconds – just enough time for a bone spear or two.

The sheer amount of creative options in the skill trees I've toyed with has me eager to see what the other classes have tucked away in theirs. Sorceresses, for example, can equip spells as a passive ability. At first glance, you'd assume this lets you double down on the school of magic you've chosen to wield, like having a 5% chance to cast a free Ice Armor for your ice build. Not quite. If you put a single point in Fire Bolt and use it in a passive Enchantment Slot, it makes any one of your abilities apply burning damage to their targets. With one skill point, your entire spellbook now benefits from Pyromancy skills, opening the door to a whole world of potential builds. What is more Sorceress than having such a mastery of magic that you can blend your spell effects?

I started as a Necromancer, chauffeur of an army of skeletons

LIVE FOR THE GRIND

The deeper you get into *Diablo IV*, the harder it gets to change your playstyle. It's one of the consequences of trashing *Diablo III*'s brilliant rune system, which allows you to swap your skills for free at any time, in favour of a *Diablo II*-style skill tree. And this is only made worse by how important your gear is to your build. Legendary items come with aspects that alter how your skills work, and many of these can define your build.

If it weren't expensive to respec, you could theoretically change your build for every Nightmare Dungeon or Helltide event, trivialising activities meant to keep you playing longer. By punishing experimentation with costly fees for crafting items, altering items, and respecing, *Diablo IV* becomes a mountain to slowly climb, day by day. The limits on character progression erode my motivation to keep chasing better and better loot. I'd much rather try other classes than grind out the same events for slightly better versions of the same loot.

Diablo IV's seasons and battle pass promise to spice this typical action RPG loop up with unique enemies, events and story quests to tackle. If it's like *Diablo III*, each season could revitalise all of the dungeons and events you've seen before and will see again and incentivise you to try classes and builds you might not have otherwise.

Diablo IV's live service structure conflicts with the joy of building your character into a god – like you do by the end of the previous games – but it does leave it an opportunity for Blizzard to identify and embrace the game's best parts through seasons or future patches. Right now, most of those things sit at the latter half of the game and are restrained by resource scarcity and tight enemy level scaling.

It's so close to channelling the progression-hungry energy that I need in a game about turning the legions of Hell into your precious loot crops. I need *Diablo IV* to treat me like an adult who will rerun a dungeon ten times for gear from the very start. I need it to encourage the kind of creativity its classes deserve. Because every second it doesn't, it ignores how immensely expressive its classes and items could be with a little more freedom to experiment. ■

PICK YOUR PLAYSTYLE

Rogue vs Necromancer

ROGUE

Pros: Highly mobile, strong AoE damage, fast-paced.

Cons: Weak defences, difficult to master, low damage in endgame.

NECROMANCER

Pros: Goth as hell, easy to play, strong survivability.

Cons: Low mobility, gear dependent, inconsistent DPS.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Diablo IV is a live service action RPG that almost buries everything that makes it great.

85

FIRST DATE JITTERS

Date squids and solve murders in MASK OF THE ROSE

By Joshua Wolens

Failbetter has the most engrossing, amusing and evocative writing in the business, but it's got an uncanny knack for hiding it behind mechanics that wear on my nerves. So it must feel like it's found a perfect home with a visual novel, right? Kind of. Fallen London is as fascinating as ever, but while many of *Mask of the Rose*'s mechanics are interesting ideas, they often feel underbaked, leaving me without understanding the decisions I'm making.

Mask of the Rose is a dating sim/murder mystery set just after London's fall, and precisely who 'you' are is open to elastic definition. You have many suitors, but you can make it clear from the off just what kinds of relationships you're open to. Physical, platonic, romantic, it's all there. You can even restrict yourself to being a matchmaker, or breaker, with the rest of the game's cast.

You have many suitors, but you can make it clear just what you're open to

Your relationships, whether platonic, romantic, indifferent or hostile, with the game's cast are the heart of *Mask of the Rose*, so it's a good job they're rewarding to pursue. So soon after London's fall, all sorts of histories and identities are bumping up against each other in the city's shifting streets. Men and women, highborn and lowborn, Jewish, Hindu and Christian all rattle around trying to find stations for themselves in a new world, even as otherworldly newcomers start making appearances.

It's richly textured and a pleasure to delve into, but your ability to do so is constrained by just how limited your time is in *Mask of the Rose*'s London. You're constantly making choices – and every choice takes time – as the game progresses, even the clothes you wear to an encounter can alter how people react to you and the dialogue options you have during it, and Failbetter clearly wants you to go through them again and again to see the impacts your choices can have.

You can get through a full run of the game in around three or four hours, but it means you'll inevitably leave plot-threads dangling and lots of relationships at a halfway point when you hit the credits. Even going through with a new character background and some different choices, I ended up feeling like I was repeating certain sections of the game to get back to where I was previously.

My first time through, I accidentally left a friend who was falsely accused of murder to hang because I got distracted pursuing various other plotlines: fomenting revolution, taking London's census, trying to woo someone attractive even though they're definitely a Tory. The second? I tried to balance my responsibilities and left them all half-finished.

The third time through I focused, and finally managed to assemble one of many possible cases for why my boy was innocent, but it felt like I had to laser-in on that plotline at the expense of the rest of the game. I could have ignored my pal, like I accidentally did the first time, but it's a tad strange to leave my chum to the gibbet because I'm too busy trying to help a different friend with their writer's block.

CASE FILES

I assembled my case for the defence using *Mask of the Rose*'s storycrafting system, the jewel in its mechanical crown. You use it in various scenarios, but for the murder case it required me to pick a culprit, their motive, and their method. If I picked three that made sense I got a new theory in my arsenal that I could go and harangue people about to further my investigation.

Often, I found myself thwarted trying to use it. Either I'd input a narrative that I thought made sense but that didn't give me a new story to go and talk to people about, or I wouldn't have the building blocks necessary to construct the theory I had in my head, and lacked the time to go and acquire them in conversations with characters.

For anyone who likes this world as much as I do, *Mask of the Rose* is an easy recommendation, but I don't know that it's going to win over anyone who wasn't bought-in. Right now, though, *Mask of the Rose* feels like a foundation for something great, but not quite great itself. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A visual novel/dating sim set in Failbetter's *Fallen London* universe

EXPECT TO PAY
$29

DEVELOPER
Failbetter Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 3700X, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
failbettergames.com/games/mask-of-the-rose

ELIGIBLE BACHELOR(ETTE)S

A who's who of London's likeliest suitors

GRIZ
Posh and deferent to authority. She still thinks the powers that be know best.

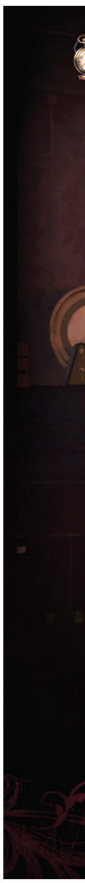
MR PAGES
Aloof and given to flights of fancy. He's also a bat in a cloak. So there's that.

HARJIT
Harjit's a bit preoccupied searching for a love he lost.

VIRGINIA
A literal devil, and predisposed to despise you when you first meet.

DAVID LANDAU
The centre of a murder trial, but you can't let every red flag dissuade you.

BATACHIKAN
A squid man. Best boy.

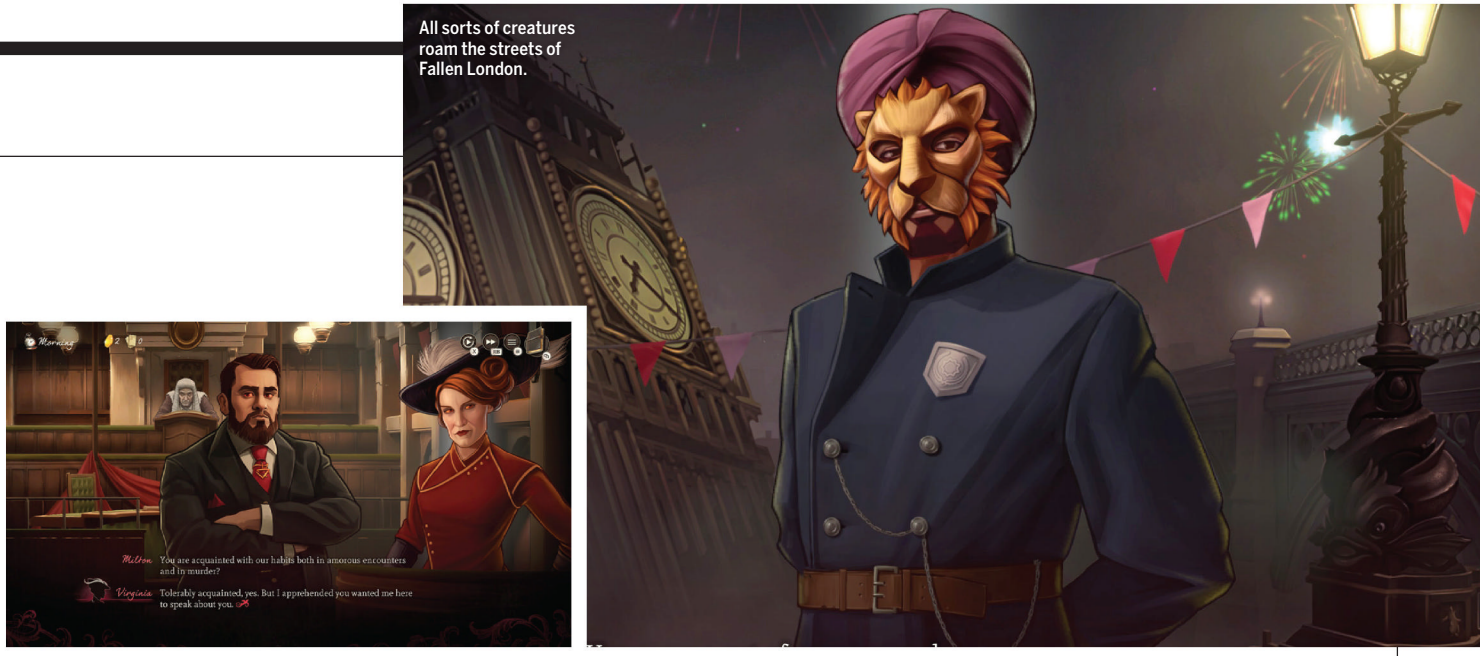


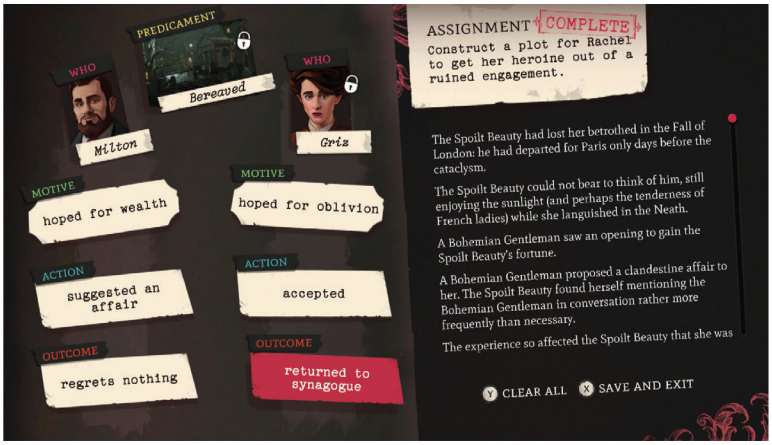
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

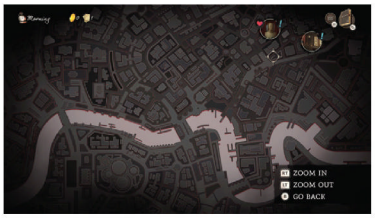
Mask of the Rose's writing shines, but the game underneath it all never fully gels together.

78

All sorts of creatures roam the streets of Fallen London.







FAR LEFT: Storycrafting lets you fashion narratives for good or ill.

LEFT: Your clothes influence people's reactions and your dialogue options.

The game is almost part *Phoenix Wright*, part dating sim.

SEMI-PRECIOUS

LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM charms despite a fractured identity

By Dominic Tarason

Despite my nature (a sun-averse hermit hoarding treasures) giving me a certain affinity for Gollum, I've been a bit sceptical about Daedalic's much-delayed *Lord of the Rings* game, as early footage left me uninspired and unsure whether there was even a coherent game here. The good news is that *Gollum* does have some interesting ideas. Unfortunately, its ideas fall into two distinct camps, and one is nicer than the other.

Mechanically, *Gollum* is a cinematic but basic stealth platformer, aspiring to *Uncharted*'s wall-clambering or *Splinter Cell*'s creeping, but awkward at both, in-character and out. On the platforming front, there's usually a single route through each area, involving some mixture of highlighted grabbable ledges, ropes, vines and bars to swing from. The environments are often gorgeous and very vertical, providing a fun excuse to make death-defying leaps. Still, Gollum is fragile and longer drops kill him instantly, ragdolling spectacularly before snapping back to the last checkpoint.

Despite frequent deaths, the path is usually clear and checkpoints generous. When intuition fails, there's a button to engage Gollum Vision™ (Sméagoggles, perhaps) and see usable objects, enemies and hinted paths highlighted. Helpful, but unreliable, only providing useful hints sometimes. More info comes from Gollum arguing with himself, calling guidance unprompted. A thematically clever excuse for a much-criticised feature.

Gollum is far too filthy and emaciated to be an action hero

The other action element is stealth. Even more linear than the platforming, it's an instant game over if Gollum gets grabbed, with little margin for error. Fortunately, the sneaky bits are simple to navigate, with deep shadows and long grass easy to spot and the patrol routes of guards obvious. There's also no combat. Orcs without helmets can be strangled if caught alone, but opportunities to do this rarely arise.

Both halves of the action side are functional but undercooked. Gollum is far too filthy and emaciated to be an action hero, often failing to grab onto ledges and dying without warning. Control inputs are sometimes dropped, and while the action is checkpointed, you either follow the intended path or die.

Thankfully, the narrative half carried *Gollum* for me. Whenever it's not being a sneaky platformer, *Gollum* impressed me as a work of interactive Tolkien fanfic set against some gorgeous backdrops. While characters are often animated stiffly (especially in dialogue), the script and world held my attention, dissecting Gollum and why he remains an outsider despite his best efforts.

SMÉAGOL

While it seldom changes much, there's frequent Telltale-esque prompts where you can pick whether Gollum or Sméagol answers in dialogue, and scenes that required me to pick one personality to argue against the other. Thematically, the game is also bifurcated, with a little

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A stealthy platform narrative Lord of the Rings adventure

EXPECT TO PAY
$78

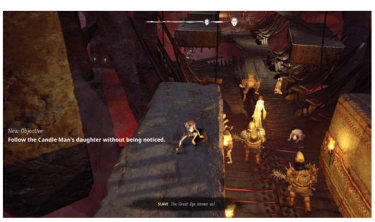
DEVELOPER
Daedalic Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Nacon

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-9900k, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Ti,

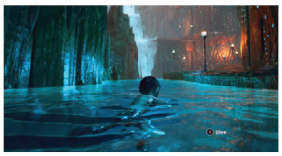
MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
daedalic.com



ABOVE: Stealth, platforming AND a timed 'tail the NPC' segment? Oh, joy.

Gollum's moral decisions aren't exactly subtle. But neither is he.



TOP: Yep, that's a platforming segment. Not even subtle about it.

FAR RIGHT: These elves look about to drop the best hair metal album of the '80s.

more than the first half of the game telling the tale of Gollum's survival in the slave pits beneath Mordor, and his efforts to escape.

Outside of Gollum's design and character performance, the game isn't particularly beholden to Peter Jackson's movies. This is all the clearer in the latter half of the 10-12 hour campaign, which takes place in elven lands. Brighter and less murdery, but still tense, with a sense that either Gollum or the elves could snap at any moment. The elves here are scruffy, lanky and condescending instead of willowy and ephemeral. An interestingly flawed portrayal.

The segue between the halves is abrupt, but I enjoyed both. Despite the foregone conclusion of the story, I remained invested in its personal, tragic stakes. Gollum is broken, struggling to befriend or trust, and his strange behaviour only makes things harder.

While wonky as a game, the story here worked for me, distinct from Jackson and Bakshi's visions of Middle-earth. Much like its boggle-eyed protagonist, *Gollum* (the game) is half nasty, half nice, and an interesting, flawed gestalt. ■

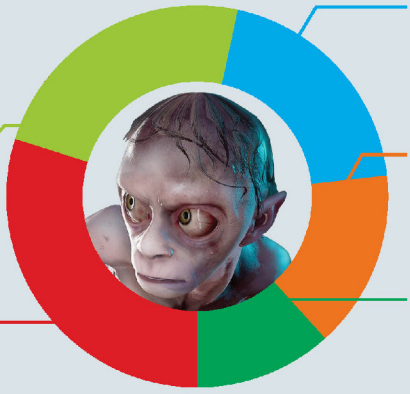
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

For all its many flaws, *Lord of the Rings: Gollum* is an often beautiful and oddly endearing adventure.

64

PRECIOUS DAYS

Gollum's average day



20% Leaping great chasms in a single bound. Dying and reloading frequently.

15% Arguing with himself. At least he's never lonely.

12% Foraging for tasty bugs or shiny things to stick in his pants.

30% Pining for The Precious and cursing the name of Bilbo Baggins.

23% Receiving mental and physical abuse, external or self-inflicted.

IRON CURTAIN

Retro-style shooter **HROT** is surprisingly whimsical for its grim looks

By Ted Litchfield

The star of the show in Sovietcore boomer shooter *Hrot* is solo developer Spytihnev's levels, all of which are inspired by real-life locations in and around Prague. The tenement blocks, metro stations, churches and castles of this twisted version of the city all feel like cheeky de-makes of real-world locations, a MyHouse.wad blown up to huge proportions. The levels twist and fold in on each other in surprising ways, and Spytihnev likes to troll.

He almost feels like a dungeon master in active conversation with you – or chuckling at your blunders – rather than a level designer who created these areas and stepped back. There's almost always some kind of trick to activating switches or picking up keys, with walls falling away to reveal enemies, trap doors dropping you into sticky situations, or even the game outright teleporting you to a completely different part of the map – *Hrot* is absolutely stuffed with little gags like these that never failed to get a chuckle out of me, and even when I got punked, I always appreciated it.

One memorable bit is the game's riff on the classic Indiana Jones boulder trap. Early in episode two, you encounter a standard, if surprising one in the lead up to the end of a level. One mission later, and look, there's another one, only this time the boulder doesn't roll in a straight line: it chases you, a surprise slapstick sequence in the middle of a uranium mine underground.

Hrot's moment-to-moment shooting is a blast, with a great variety of hard-hitting enemies demanding improvisation and mastery of its arsenal, but I did find that arsenal to be rather limited. It's all FPS staples: pistol, single and double-barrelled shotguns, SMG, sniper crossbow, and a "hussite hand cannon" (read: rocket launcher). The weapons feel and sound great while being well-balanced against each other. I always appreciate when a super shotty doesn't outmode the regular one, and *Hrot*'s ammo economy means you'll want to save shells when both barrels would be overkill. *Hrot*'s only 'out there' Soviet energy weapons, however, disappointed me with their low power and general lack of ammo.

A great variety of hard-hitting enemies demanding improvisation

GETTING GOOFY

Episode one, Kiss Me Gustav, is the most grim and oppressive, focusing on sparse, modern, Soviet-era locales. The middle chapter, The Degustation, remains my favourite, moving out into the country while mixing in more pagan, earthy settings like gothic castles or a haunted farm. There's a three-level stretch at the end, Kašperk Castle, Dobrosov Fortress and The Granny's Valley, that's just an all-timer run of FPS maps for me. It sees you go from a 14th century castle where you climb the battlements before descending into its flooded cellars, to a cramped Soviet bunker, to an unnerving rural key hunt. This sequence is *Hrot* at its best, and really underscores the variety Spytihnev was able to wring out of this grim, brown world.

Episode three, Gastroscopy, really goes ham on *Hrot*'s sense of absurd, surreal weirdness and for the most part, it landed for me, featuring highlights like a bumper-car boss, adorable rat-killing canine companions who shot to the top of my list of favourite videogame dogs, and an entire level that's a homage to *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* and a 1930s Czech sci-fi novel.

That goofiness worked for me right up until *Hrot*'s final boss. Spoilers ahead, but it's, ah, epic shirtless Vladimir Putin. This non-sequitur landed like a wet fart, and not in a good way like *Hrot*'s more scatological humour. Previous episode bosses were freaky zombified versions of historical communist leaders of Czechoslovakia, and they felt like sharp, winking riffs on the absurdity of *Wolfenstein 3D*'s Mecha Hitler, while low-poly Putin feels like an incongruous meme, instantly dating *Hrot* more than a 20th-century socialist politician ever could. What's more, some manner of zombified Lenin was right there for the taking! Ending gripes aside though, I love *Hrot*, and it had me hooked right up until that final fight. *Hrot* is a great FPS, one of the best of the boomer shooter renaissance. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Quake*/*Dusk*-inspired retro shooter set in '80s communist Czechoslovakia

EXPECT TO PAY
$29

DEVELOPER
Spytihnev

PUBLISHER
In-house

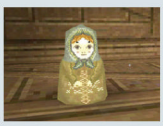
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12600K, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
tinyurl.com/bd633ac8

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS

My favourite interactables



MATRYOSHKA DOLL
Interacting with this doll takes her apart and puts her back together again.

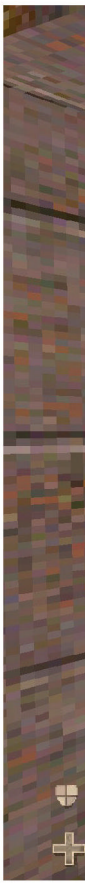
TYPEWRITER
Clicking away at this little typewriter produces a love letter to a historical hero of socialism.

TOILET
Not only can you flush *Hrot*'s many toilets, but if you face away and press E, you'll fart.

KEYBOARD
You can play every note on this little piano and switch between different modes too.

NU, POGODI! BOOTLEG GAME AND WATCH
This recreates a bootleg version of the Game & Watch.

LAUNDRY MACHINE
Clicking on this Tatramatka-brand laundry machine sets it vibrating.



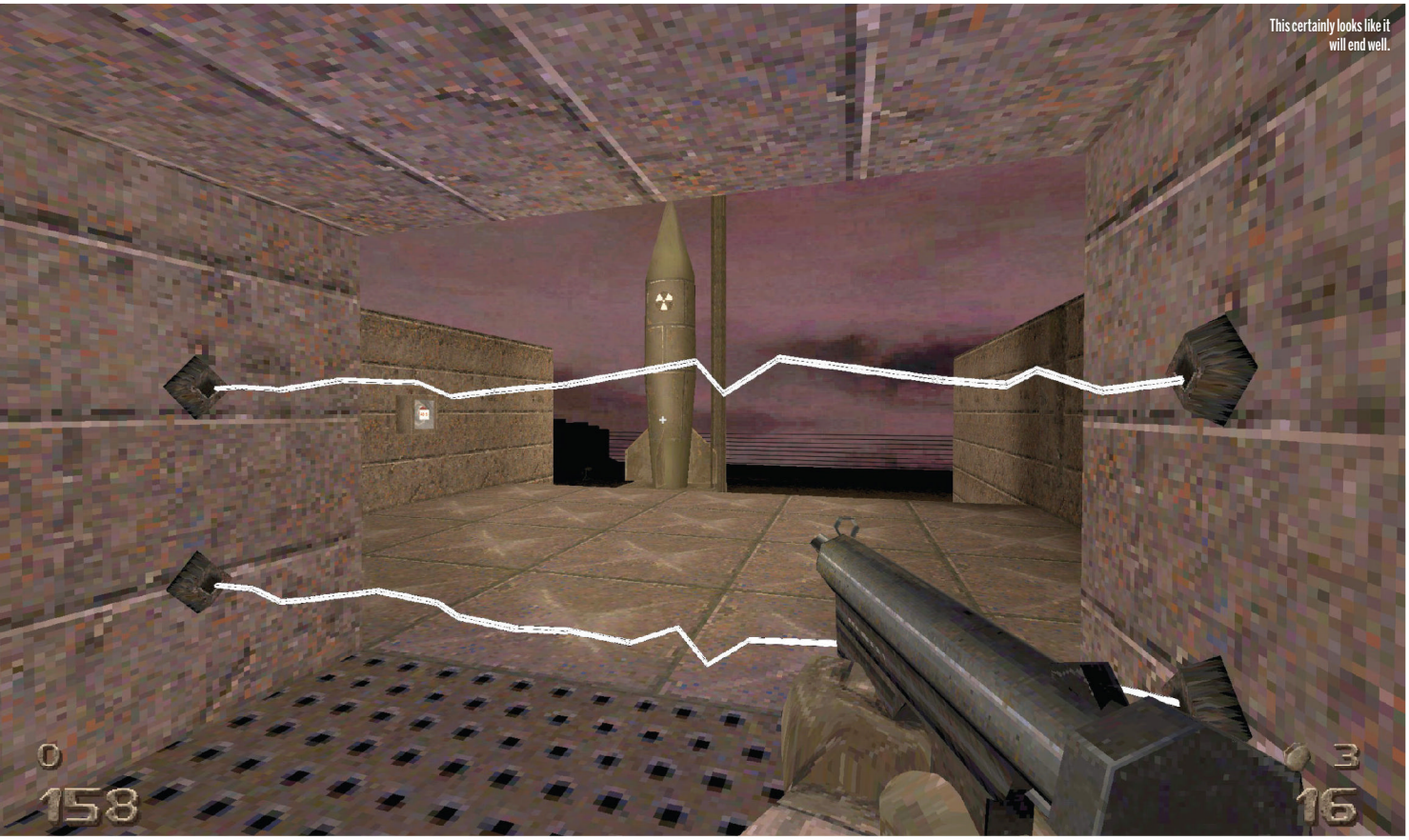
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A shooter whose imaginative levels and grim looks belie an off-the-wall sense of humour

87

ABOVE: SpytihnDv says he channelled an unpleasant childhood field trip into this unnerving level.

LEFT: Choo choo! All aboard!



ROLLERPOSER TYCOON

Parking up the wrong tree in PARK BEYOND

By Lewis Parker

Park Beyond isn't a very subtle game, both in the sense that it's loud and bombastic, and that it's not exactly hiding which other games it's been influenced by. Sometimes though, that's ok – hundreds of games have tried to ride the coattails of _Fortnite_ or _Call of Duty_, but there aren't that many trying to emulate 2000s-era management sims like _Rollercoaster Tycoon_.

Much as I did in other sims 20 years ago (oh god, did *SimCity 2000* really come out in 1993?), I initially decided to skip the campaign in *Park Beyond* and jump right into sandbox mode. At this point the game lightly suggested that I should at least give the tutorial a go before getting started. I relented and, thankfully, the tutorial was succinct and relatively easy to digest. To *Park Beyond*'s credit, after just a brief five-minute talking to, I felt well-equipped enough to tackle building a theme park of my own.

After messing around for a couple of hours in sandbox mode, I looped back around and started the campaign mode properly. It didn't take me long to realise that the bulk of what was covered in the tutorial is simply stretched out and dumbed down even further for the campaign, admittedly alongside some new information regarding the park management mechanics. Although the campaign does feature fully-voiced cutscenes and an attempt at a story, it never stops feeling like one long tutorial. I got bored of working my way through it and kept stopping to jump back into sandbox mode, even though it's only a few hours long.

Their constant attempts at humour are a lot more miss than hit

Considering how straightforward and to the point the actual tutorial is, I would recommend just ignoring the campaign and saving yourself the trouble of having to spend any time looking at its eerie, waxwork-like characters. They give off this unsettling, uncanny-valley vibe, and their constant attempts at humour are a lot more miss than hit. It's best to just bypass them completely and get right into the meat of *Park Beyond*: building huge, absurd rollercoasters.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A building and management theme park simulator, with a greater focus on the wacky and the bizarre than its predecessors

EXPECT TO PAY
$75

DEVELOPER
Limbic Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7820X, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060 Super, plus AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
en.bandainamcoent.eu/park-beyond/park-beyond

JUMPING THE PARK

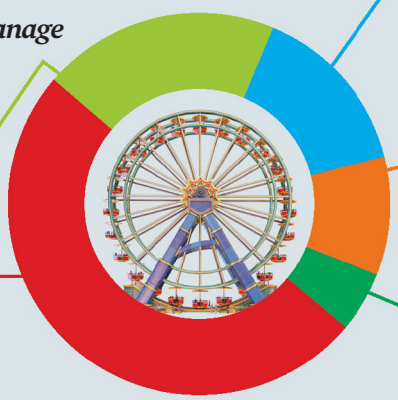
Creating your own elaborate rides is undoubtedly the most fun part of *Park Beyond*. After spending a little while wrestling with the physics engine and the initially unwieldy controls, I found the tools for laying out my park and customising rollercoasters to be surprisingly intuitive and, more importantly, unrestrictive. You're given pretty remarkable freedom to create what you want, even if it can take a bit of testing and experimentation to achieve. *Park Beyond* does help you out with clear visual indicators of what's working and what isn't, which is especially handy when trying to craft rides that are on the more absurd side of things. The node system lets you fix your rides by segmenting off and manipulating parts of the track that you've already placed, and it's ultimately pretty lenient when it comes to letting you create physics-defying rides.

There's also a pretty large selection of shops, restaurants, scenery, and pre-built rides that you can use to bulk out the space – all of which are upgradable through the use of 'impossifying'. Impossification is a cute little mechanic that lets you increase visitor happiness by buffing up your rides and facilities, making them grander and more fantastical as a result. It's most noticeable with the rides, which progress through two levels of elaborate and, dare I say, impossible changes until eventually they resemble rollercoasters out of your most enthusiastic daydreams – or nightmares, depending on your disposition – that give your customers whole new experiences. Impossifying shops and staff members is less exciting mechanically, mostly only bumping up your profit margins, but at least still comes with fun visual changes, such as turning your entertainment team into *Pac-Man* ghosts.

The terrain manipulation options are pleasingly vast too, allowing you

FERRIS WHEEL OF FAIL

How you'll manage your time in Park Beyond



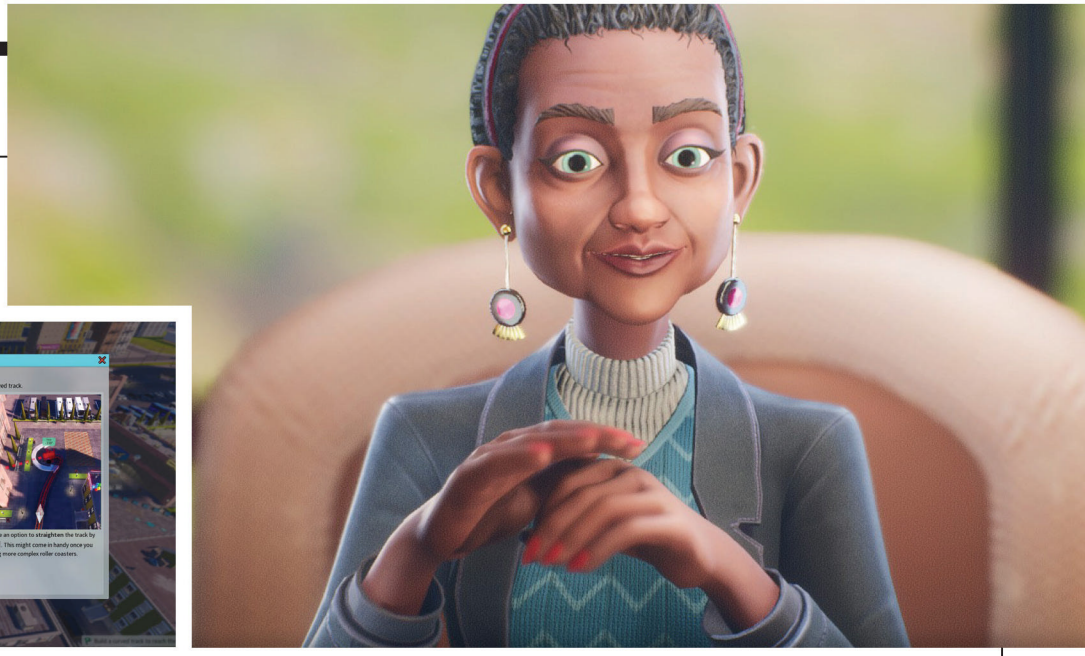
20% PLACING BENCHES
Benches have to be placed in almost every corner.

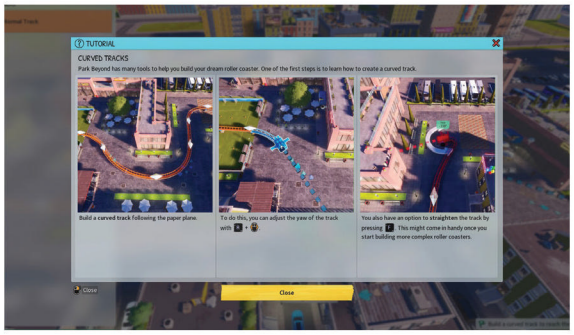
50% FINDING YOUR ENTERTAINERS
Should the game bug out and refuse to locate your staff.

15% BUYING TOILETS
Or, set up 20 coffee shops and then delete the loos.

10% PLACING BINS
If your park is unhygienic, your visitors will leave angry feedback.

5% HIRING MORE STAFF
Go into a menu, click hire. Riveting stuff, indeed.

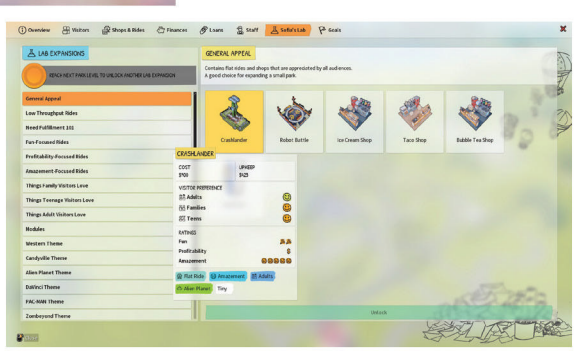




FAR LEFT: Putting the 'whee!' in 'Ferris Wheel'. Sorry.

BELOW: Now you can get motion sickness from the comfort of your desk at home!

Is it just me, or are these character models super creepy? It's the eyes, right?



RIGHT: ...and the crowd goes mild.

BELOW: *Park Beyond* insanity.

to smooth over surfaces, create large bodies of water, and chisel out deep canyons with no fuss. A lot of the more impressive rollercoaster add-ons want you to take advantage of your free rein over the terrain too, letting you shoot passengers over lakes, tunnel underground, or even loop around and through man-made gaps in the environment.

BUMMER KARTS

I tested *Park Beyond* on two different builds, and the weakest of the two (i7-7820X, RTX 2060 Super, 16GB RAM) should have been able to comfortably handle the game on it's recommended settings, given the system requirements (i7-7700K, GTX 970, 12GB RAM). I did unfortunately run into some pretty heavy load times, and some noticeable slowdown when my parks started to get a little too big. The better hardware I tested the game on did perform smoothly, but I'm sure most people aren't gonna nip down the shop to buy an RTX 4080 just so they can get *Park Beyond* to run properly, especially given the minimum specs give no indication it should be necessary.

Worse still, regardless of which build I played on, I always ran into the same severe bugs. I had frequent crashes to desktop with no error messages, music in missions and sandbox mode had a terrible habit of infinitely stuttering, and there was a lot of texture clipping when using optional camera modes. A lot of missions also flat out refused to progress, even when meeting their requirements – like placing rides in certain places, or selling a specific amount of one item in a shop – giving me no option but to reset and try my luck again. Most aggravatingly, occasionally the quick-select options in the management menu would permanently bug out and always teleport me to a completely wrong shop or staff member, which meant I instead had to spend god knows how long manually fishing one person out of a sea of customers just to change their costume.

Regardless of which build I played on, I always ran into the same bugs

LINKEDIN PARK

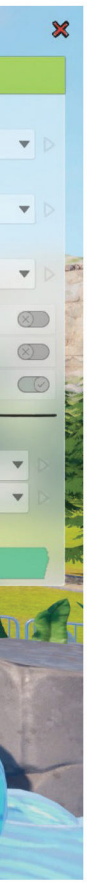
I'm also not entirely sure if some of the criteria that denote your park's success are bugged, or the result of opaque design decisions. The second time I tried to create a park in sandbox mode, I gave myself a huge starting budget and built several expensive, ridiculously large custom rollercoasters. I made sure to still follow the tutorial's advice and build different flat rides, shops, toilets, staff rooms and lovingly decorated benches in a bid to keep customers happy, but for some reason nobody wanted to go on the custom rides I'd built – even though they were impossified and seemingly had good reviews. I tried reducing the ride price incrementally until eventually giving up and making them free, but no matter what they were still listed as 'abandoned'. Other sandbox playthroughs I attempted didn't run into this problem – was it because I spent too much too quickly, or was it just a rare bug? I've no clue – which after the time I invested in my creations is frustrating.

It was especially odd because normally making your park a success in *Park Beyond* is, if anything, much too simple and easy. Even on higher difficulty levels, the game only ever demands you give your customers access to basic necessities, hire the correct amount of staff, and occasionally use the heat map function to target any unhygienic or underdeveloped parts of your park. All of it's so straightforward to keep ticking along that it's mind-numbing. Any time you're not actively building coasters or rearranging your layout, there's little of interest to engage you.

Park Beyond feels like a difficult game to critique. Its main attraction is impressive, but it's lacking in amenities. The system of building and customising your park is really impressive – one of the best such systems I've seen in a sim – but all the actual management is so under-baked that it just ends up feeling tacked on, and without a robust campaign to challenge you, the experience feels thin.

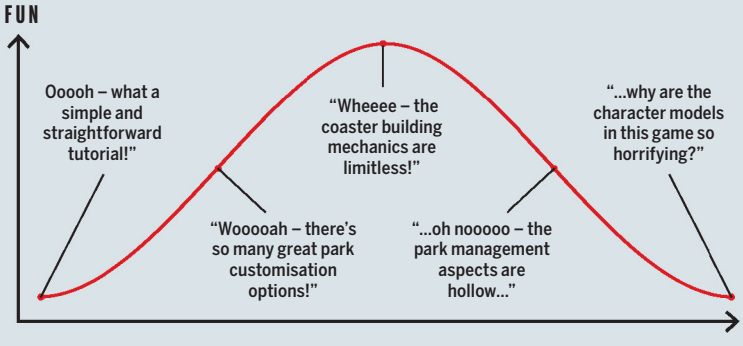
If all you want to do is hop straight into sandbox mode, give yourself unlimited funds, and build an unfeasibly large rollercoaster, *Park Beyond*'s worth picking up... after a few performance patches, and probably on sale. If you're looking for any depth beyond that however, and certainly if you're the type of person more interested in business management than loop-de-loop physics, I can't recommend it at all.

I've been trying to avoid harping on a comparison between *Park Beyond* and its obvious inspiration *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, but at a certain point you have to put them side by side. What you realise is how little *Park Beyond* has evolved the core formula, leaving its management systems feeling archaic. The creativity and freedom in creating rides and designing your park is light years ahead of what was possible in early sims, but the lack of depth make even *Park Beyond*'s strengths feel like style over substance. ■



A LITERAL ROLLERCOASTER OF EMOTIONS

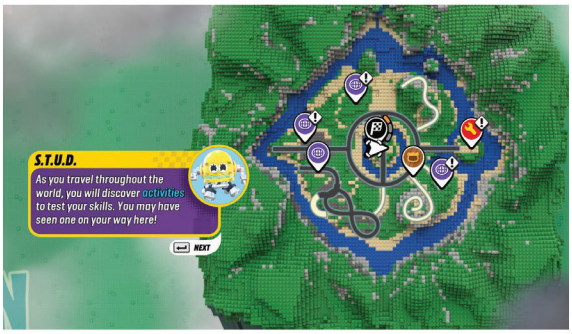
Putting the 'art' in 'line chart'



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Several facets of Park Beyond's park creation system are let down by a lack of attention to detail to other mechanics.

50



ABOVE: Your five-year-old kid's new favourite villain.

FAR RIGHT: Limitless imagination: not pictured.

BELOW: Motion blur might be a little too high by default.

A WOLF IN JEEP'S CLOTHING

LEGO 2K DRIVE is a tyre'd and tested formula, ruined by corporate greed

By Lewis Parker

Every time I play a new kart racing game, I'm always disappointedly surprised at the lack of innovation within the genre – and *Lego 2K Drive* is nothing new in that respect. I've played this game before. You've, undoubtedly, played this game before. This is *Mario Kart*. This is *Crash Team Racing*. This is *Garfield Kart*.

Lego 2K Drive's story mode is absolutely stuffed full of content, although this is mostly to its detriment. The actual story missions only took me about five hours to complete, but there's a wealth of side content to work through once you've beaten them. The side missions are very cut and paste however, and you'll be repeating the same missions several times across every map if you're going for 100% completion or, worse, trying to earn more Brickbux – *Lego 2K Drive*'s in-game currency for its micro-transaction store.

Players above a certain age will most likely find themselves groaning through endless puns in an attempt to skip to the next race, but kids will absolutely love the never-ending stream of gags. The humour in *Lego 2K Drive* does feel a little bit more juvenile than your standard *Lego* game, but I will admit that some of the jokes did manage to get a few chuckles out of me – mostly as a result of Shadow Z's voice actor Rene Mujica fully committing to the role.

Kids will absolutely love the never-ending stream of gags

A NEED FOR GREED

The one feature that does actually set *Lego 2K Drive* apart from its contemporaries is, unfortunately, both its biggest draw and its biggest drawback. The build system is genuinely impressive, allowing you to craft any manner of car, boat or off-road vehicle you could possibly imagine. The system itself is easy to get to grips with, well explained and effectively limitless (outside of literal weight limitations).

However, to get the most out of build mode you're going to need the best parts – parts that are only available to buy with real money. The best parts are locked within Unkie's Emporium, a colourful-looking storefront that allows you to spend the Brickbux you've purchased with real money. The microtransactions in this game are predatory, a term I don't use lightly, and completely detract from what would otherwise be a family-friendly game that parents and kids alike could enjoy.

Lego 2K Drive is also very up front about making sure you know this is a game for children. Everything from the story mode, which constantly refers to you as "kid", to the micro-transaction store itself, which asks you to get your parent's permission before accessing it, constantly reminds you that this is a game targeted at a younger demographic.

Performance-wise, *Lego 2K Drive* ran extremely well on both builds I tested it on. The lower-end build (i7-7820X, GeForce RTX 2060 Super, 16GB RAM) almost managed to run *Lego 2K Drive* on its highest settings, although this did have a slightly noticeable effect on the framerate. Even in split-screen, the i7-7820X build managed to perform well with relatively little in the way of performance issues. My higher-end build (Ryzen 9 5900X, RTX 4080, 64GB RAM) ran the game with absolutely no issues, at a perfectly consistent framerate.

There is a lot to love in *Lego 2K Drive*, especially if you are in any way a fan of kart racers or Lego in general. The game runs well, it's got a wealth of content to work through, and there is a clear love for the *Lego* franchise that permeates everything from the game design to the maps themselves. Sure, outside of its build system, *Lego 2K Drive* isn't exactly trying to be innovative, but solid, fun gameplay more than makes up for a lack of ambition. This makes it all the more disappointing that the micro-transactions in *Lego 2K Drive* makes it hard to recommend to anyone within its targeted demographic. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A kart racer set in the world of Lego

EXPECT TO PAY
$90

DEVELOPER
Visual Concepts

PUBLISHER
2K

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7820X, 16GB RAM, RTX 2060 Super, plus AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
lego.2k.com/drive

LE-GO OF YOUR CREDIT CARD DETAILS

Parents are going to be bricking it when they see the final bill

500 COINS
WORTH $4.99
Can be transferred for 10,000 Brickbux which will get you... ONE WHOLE CAR!

2300 COINS
WORTH $19.99
Can be exchanged for 40,000 Brickbux and the last 300 can be used for 5,000 coins.

6500 COINS
WORTH $49.99
That can buy you roughly half of the available content currently in the store.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Lego 2K Drive is fun, although repetitive, and the build system alone is enough reason to check it out.

59

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

The merchant on the right comes every day to offer a selection of new birds.

EARLY BIRDS

Many wings make flight work in RAVENHAUL

Given the uniform wretchedness of delivery companies, perhaps it's time to return to the days of carrier pigeons, whose only significant drawback was the risk of them shitting all over your door. Still preferable to Hermes, of course, and a great premise for an indie management game. Playing as a sentient raven operating out of a massive tower in a gorgeous fantasy setting, can you run a successful, bird-based delivery company?

That's not a rhetorical question, by the way: yes, yes you can, as *Ravenhaul* is pretty chilled-out for a management game. As a very wings-on boss, you spend the game fluttering between various stations in the tower, where you'll select jobs, stock up on food pellets, and carry parcels to your crew, as jobs come in.

Each parcel comes from one of several factions in the game, and delivering them will increase your reputation, ultimately granting access to the other factions and better jobs that will earn you lots more money. So you give a letter to one of your birds and send them off on their merry way, for however many hours it takes for the job to be completed. Your starting birds won't be able to fly to distant locations, or go especially fast, or they might require lots of sleep to recover after returning from a job, so pretty soon you'll need to improve their feeble stats. Better yet, save up for stronger birds, who might fly massive distances or sleep things off far more quickly. Keep a varied menagerie, and pick the right bird for the job.

Keep a varied menagerie, and pick the right bird for the job

HAUL OR NOTHING

What you're doing is balancing the books, weighing up your need for better birds against your unfortunate need to feed them all. And your desire for higher-paying jobs against their much stricter time limits, and harsher penalties if they don't get delivered in time. It's possible to run into negative cash – but this is not a game that especially wants you to fail. Put your beak down and take small jobs for a while, and you'll be able to climb your way out of debt.

It's a game where you can go at your own pace, and that's supported by *Ravenhaul*'s overall vibe, which for a management game is surprisingly mellow. There are long stretches of nothing while your birds are all away on jobs, when you're just fluttering round and watching the world, as the exquisite pixel art moves from dawn to dusk and back.

Sure, you can use the time slider to speed things up, and I did that a lot, but take the time to wallow in the atmosphere as well. Look at the way your front door – a big metal beak – creaks open to admit parcels, and notice the hanging basket swaying gently in the breeze. This is an enjoyable management game set in a beautiful, relaxing fantasy world. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A mellow management game where you run a bird-based courier company

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
BippinBits

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/Ravenhaul

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A management game that's less about spreadsheets and more about spectacular views you can kick back with.

84

BELOW: The enemies aren't infinite, clearing the stage for the boss fight.

KING CRIMSON

She shoots, she scores in shmup CRIMSON FANTASIA

***Crimson Fantasia* makes daring changes to the traditional shmup formula, in that you can't actually die, no matter how many times you're hit by enemies or bullets. What's the point of it, then? Well it's to set an unbeatable score, of course.**

But without death to worry about, you're free to focus on earning points, by haemorrhaging bullets and dashing through enemies. By chaining dashes together you'll start a points multiplier, and that's how you'll make your way up the leaderboard. Getting hit stuns you, which could be enough to ruin your multiplier streak. That might actually be a fate worse than death.

There are other changes. You're not playing on scrolling stages, but in one small arena with constantly spawning monsters, while the game will end after only a couple of minutes. In many ways this is like Vampire Survivors – another arena-based action game with a time limit – but with a focus on dodging, and no abilities to unlock. It's just you, your skill, and the high-score table, just as it always used to be.

Should you really want to test that skill, you can play on Lunatic mode, which increases the challenge considerably. Survive for three minutes now, and against trickier bullet patterns and even faster projectiles. To underline the differences, there's a new tune and the stage is set at night.

It's a good time, whether you have the reflexes for shmups or – slowly raises hand – not. I've never been one for score-chasing, so mainly I enjoyed the freedom of playing a bullet hell and not dying. ■

75

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Crow's Nest	bit.ly/CrimsonFantasia

EXPRESS DELIVERY

Driving dangerously in delivery game NEO CITY EXPRESS

Daggers McBlack is an exceptional name, even if the character it's attached to is a bit of a numpty. This is a game about driving while texting, while checking Tinder and taking drugs. But I suppose it is the gritty cyber-future, where everyone has the attention span of... er, what was I saying?

Oh yes: *Neo City Express*. It's a joke game, and a good one, in the vein of *The Typing of the Dead*, only instead of typing sentences to fend off zombies, you're doing it to reply to incoming messages. As you move the car with the arrow keys, steering it out of the way of oncoming cars, the rest of the keyboard is free for you to painstakingly t-y-p-e out each message, as a trio of dialogue options appears on the screen. You don't have to worry about punctuation, or even putting in the spaces, because the space bar has another function: injecting drugs that will keep you from swaying while driving the car.

At first you're merely driving while texting, but soon you get so cocky that you're opening Tinder to peruse the singles in your local area. The writing is hilarious, packed with great jokes whether they're in your phone screen or the cutscene dialogue, so much so that my main cause of crashing was me sitting there reading it.

It's a short game, but it piles distraction atop distraction until you're waggling the mouse to wake your sleepy head, and driving dangerously to please your talking car. They should use it when teaching learners what not to do on the road, but it will probably also improve your typing skills. ■

79

BELOW: In each stage you deliver a package.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Pedro Medeiros et al	bit.ly/NeoCityExpress

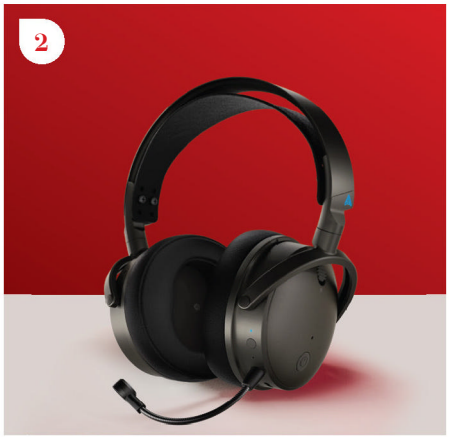
GROUP TEST

WIRELESS GAMING HEADSETS

There's never been a better time to cut the cord and free your ears from your desktop.

By Jacob Ridley

If you had to buy a wireless version of any one peripheral for your PC, which would it be? Personally, it's a close call between my mouse and my headset, but I think I'd probably say headset for its overall benefits and ease. With a set of wireless cans you're free to wander from your desk and make a cup of coffee without turning off your tunes or leaving the Discord chat, and as you'll see with a few of the headsets I've tested this issue, there's even more flexibility in all-in-one wireless headsets for gaming at home and taking on the go, too.



Nova Pro Wireless

STEELSERIES $649

All-in-one

1 The SteelSeries Nova Pro is from a relatively new type of wireless headset that aims to be both a gaming headset while you're at a desk as well as something to wear while you're out and about. On that front, the Nova Pro absolutely delivers, but for offering two headsets' worth of functionality it'll also cost you as much. The Nova Pro is extremely sleek with its connectivity, offering the ability to connect to both Bluetooth and 2.4GHz devices simultaneously. It's not a feature only SteelSeries offers, but it's absolutely key to the ease of using this thing around the house and out of it. The other real winners are the hot-swappable batteries that SteelSeries does so well on its other gaming headsets. That makes the 18-44 hour battery life of a single battery a lot less of a sticking point. With music and gaming both on the agenda for the Nova Pro, getting the sound profile right is key. It has a great response when wired, though less so while wireless, and you can tweak it to your liking.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Active noise cancellation
- Great EQ
- Expensive

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ WIRELESS, BLUETOOTH 5.0 / **DRIVER:** 40MM DYNAMIC / **BATTERY LIFE:** ~18-44HRS / **MICROPHONE:** RETRACTABLE BOOM / **WEIGHT:** 338G

Maxwell

AUDEZE $469

No compromise

2 I don't want to be anchored to my desktop by a cable. The issue is a lot of audiophile-grade headsets demand that I am tethered by a wire in order to get the highest quality audio to my ears. For a long time I've been chasing something that can do both; a headset with planar magnetic drivers and wireless connectivity. And I've finally found one.

The Audeze Maxwell is everything I'm looking for in a single package. The bass response is unsurprisingly excellent for this pair of planar magnetic cans, but what's more surprising is how expansive the soundscape is for a closed-back design. It supports both 2.4GHz wireless and Bluetooth on the wireless front, and battery life is rated to a spectacular 80 hours.

A decent-sounding detachable boom mic rounds out the Maxwell's gaming headset credentials. Though the mic is the Maxwell's weakest link, its quality isn't representative of the headset as a whole, and it's a seriously convincing package.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Stunning sound
- Long battery life
- Good mic

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ WIRELESS, BLUETOOTH 5.3, USB TYPE-C, 3.5MM / **DRIVER:** 90MM PLANAR MAGNETIC / **BATTERY LIFE:** ~80HRS / **MICROPHONE:** DETACHABLE BOOM / **WEIGHT:** 490G

Cloud Alpha Wireless

HYPERX **$299**

Always on

3 The HyperX Cloud Alpha is one of our favourite wired gaming headsets, and if making it wireless wasn't enough to get a nod from us, HyperX strapped a battery onto this headset that's capable of running for 300 hours. All the while remaining relatively light and comfortable.

Far from a one-trick pony, these cans deliver an impressive sound quality from the 50mm drivers on-board. That's not so much of a surprise considering the prestige of the original wired set, but once again you can expect impressive bass with tons of clarity throughout the frequency range, culminating in a clear and vibrant profile.

The only downside to this headset is the lack of connectivity options beyond the included 2.4GHz dongle. These are a pure PC gaming headset, not a do-it-all wireless set like the Nova Pro or Stealth Pro. Still, the Alpha Wireless are hard to fault, and they're in a league of their own for battery life. If that's most important to you, there's no need to look elsewhere.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- 300hr battery life
- Excellent audio
- Comfortable

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ WIRELESS / **DRIVER:** 50MM DYNAMIC / **BATTERY LIFE:** ~300HRS / **MICROPHONE:** DETACHABLE BOOM / **WEIGHT:** 335G

HS55 Wireless

CORSAIR **$159**

Weaker wireless

4 The wired version of the Corsair HS55 is my favourite cheap headset right now. This wireless version, not quite so much. It's not bad by any means, they share a lot of similarities in build quality and comfort, but the microphone is a particularly weak point for the wireless model. I wish I could embed an MP3 into this page so you could listen for yourself, but there's a light crackle to my voice when recorded via the wireless HS55. Whereas the wired model sounds great. I'm a little sad to see the HS55's strongest feature become one of its weakest as a trade-off for its wireless functionality.

The battery life isn't much to write home about, at 24 hours or thereabouts over 2.4GHz. However, this headset weighs only 274g, and I can't really fault Corsair on that one. It's enough charge to see it through a week without repetitious charging, and that modest weight atop of your head keeps this headset plenty comfortable over longer periods.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Affordable
- Lightweight
- Poor microphone quality

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ WIRELESS, BLUETOOTH / **DRIVER:** 50MM DYNAMIC / **BATTERY LIFE:** ~24-37 HOURS / **MICROPHONE:** FLIP BOOM / **WEIGHT:** 274G

THE BIGGEST IMPROVEMENT WITH THE 2023 VERSION IS THE UPGRADED MICROPHONE

DRIVERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The two main types of driver found in gaming headsets

DYNAMIC DRIVERS

By far the most common type of driver in a headset, these are also the most affordable. They typically use a neodymium magnet surrounded by a coil, which moves with the electrical current to produce sound through an attached diaphragm. While often very good, dynamic drivers struggle to match the frequency response of planar magnetic drivers and can distort more at higher volumes.

PLANAR MAGNETIC

Usually requiring more space and costing more, Planar Magnetic drivers tend to offer a wider soundstage and more bass definition than dynamic drivers due to their larger, flat diaphragm. We love planar magnetic, but you tend to see less of this type for gaming headsets.

BlackShark V2 Pro 2023

RAZER **$349**

New look

5 This is Razer's mid-generation upgrade to the already popular BlackShark V2 Pro, and I could have forgiven it for slapping a V3 on it for the improvements made to one of our favourite wireless gaming headsets. Alas, it didn't. Weirder still, Razer fully intends to keep selling the original V2 Pro for cheaper. The biggest improvement with the 2023 version is the upgraded microphone. The older one was a little ropey, to be honest, but that's no longer a cause for concern here. Razer's also updated to a USB Type-C connection for fast and ubiquitous charging capability, and an audio profile switch on the right ear cup. It's also done us a kindness and removed the necessity to have Synapse running in the background on your machine. But it's the price that holds the BlackShark V2 Pro 2023 back. It's no small amount more than the original V2 Pro, and while the mic is superior on the newer version, it's not make or break for the money.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Clear new microphone
- Wireless connection is rock solid
- Original V2 Pro is cheaper

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ WIRELESS, BLUETOOTH 5.3 / **DRIVER:** 50MM DYNAMIC / **BATTERY LIFE:** ~70HRS / **MICROPHONE:** DETACHABLE BOOM / **WEIGHT:** 320G

Stealth Pro

TURTLE BEACH **$599**

Off the mark

6 Turtle Beach is vying for premium wireless headset supremacy with the Stealth Pro, but it's just not capable of that in its current form. From its awkward software to its uncomfortable headband over long periods, it requires some finessing to really strive to greatness in the crowded gaming headset space.

Part of that discomfort comes from the 422g weight, which is notably greater than the SteelSeries Nova Pro it's going up against most of all. It's at least lighter than the Audeze Maxwell, but I'd still take the Maxwells over the Stealth Pro any day. And it's not like you're saving money with these cans, either. Not all is lost, however. The Stealth Pro's noise cancelling works wonders and you know I love a swappable battery system. The battery life is a little slim per battery but switching them out couldn't get much easier. It's just that for this sort of money you can get better, and that's the mark against the Turtle Beach that matters most.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Active noise cancellation
- Headband is uncomfortable
- Software is a pain

SPECS CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ WIRELESS, BLUETOOTH 5.1 / **DRIVER:** 50MM DYNAMIC / **BATTERY LIFE:** ~12 HOURS PER BATTERY / **MICROPHONE:** DETACHABLE BOOM / **WEIGHT:** 422G

GROUP TEST

OLED GAMING MONITORS

OLED technology has arrived on the desktop at last

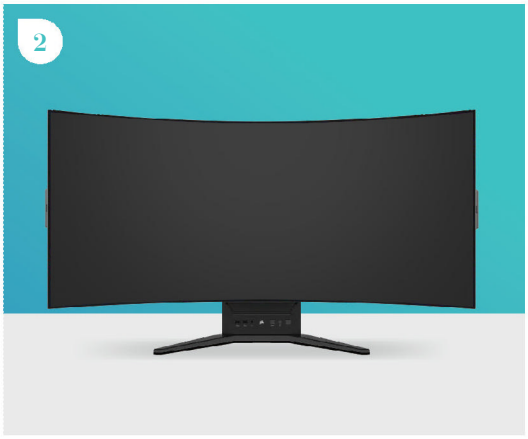
By Jeremy Laird

It's been an awfully long time coming. But rejoice, for the OLED revolution has finally made the leap from smartphones and TVs to the PC. You can now choose from a critical mass of gaming-optimised monitors all powered by the latest OLED tech.

From full 4K resolution and ultrawide aspect ratios to 240Hz refresh and sub-1m response times, OLED panels certainly tick a lot of boxes. You can even get an OLED monitor with a flexible screen. But is the technology truly ready for the demands of the PC?

Should you be worried about burn-in and image retention on an OLED PC monitor, for instance? What about peak brightness? Does OLED tech still have a problem lighting up the whole panel?

And if OLED is indeed up to proper PC duty, which of the brave new generation of purpose-built gaming panels should you pick? Time to find out.



Mobiuz EX480UZ

BENQ $1,499

Bigger isn't always a whole lot better

1 For now, all OLED gaming monitors are derived from HDTV tech. That's why you can only get the full 4K resolution from really large panels like the 48-inch BenQ Mobiuz EX480UZ.

Honestly, it's too big for a multipurpose desktop monitor. The ergonomics don't work and the pixels are fat and ugly. As something that doubles as a PC gaming monitor and maybe also a console screen, this BenQ only begins to make sense thanks to its combination of both DisplayPort 1.4 and HDMI 2.1 connectivity.

But even so, the LG-sourced OLED panel lacks punch next to any premium LCD monitor. It just doesn't work as well as the Samsung QD-OLED competition in a PC context. The HDR performance is decent in darker game scenes, but the more of the panel you light up, the less punch it has.

In the end, features like the bundled IR remote and better integrated speakers than usual for a PC monitor aren't enough to offset the fact that you can get a similarly-specced 120Hz 4K OLED TV for way less money.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- The real 4K deal
- Nice feature set
- Limited full-screen brightness

SPECS SIZE: 48-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** LG WOLED / **RESOLUTION:** 3840 X 2160 / **REFRESH:** 120HZ

Xeneon Flex 45WQHD240

CORSAIR $3,299

Corsair's flexible panel tech comes at a painful price

2 You'd better *really* like the Corsair Xeneon Flex 45WQHD240's bendy OLED panel tech, because it's hard to see what else justifies the price tag.

This Corsair 45-inch OLED monitor runs the same 3440 x 1440 native res as the 34-inch ultrawide competition. The net result is much bigger pixels on such a big panel. That's suboptimal on the Windows desktop, though less of an issue actually in game.

However, what certainly will bother you when you fire up, say, *Cyberpunk 2077* running with full HDR reheat enabled, is the Flex's weedy full screen brightness. It's very disappointing. It doesn't really even sizzle as much as you'd hope in darker game scenes with smaller light sources.

OK, the pixel response is outrageously fast and the 240Hz refresh makes for very low latency. But for almost any money, let alone this lofty price point, the panel simply lacks drama and fizz. So, it's nice to have the option of bending the Xeneon Flex or leaving it flat. But $3,300 worth of nice? That'll be a big, fat no.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Flexible panel tech
- Very fast
- Disappointing panel brightness

SPECS SIZE: 45-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** LG WOLED / **RESOLUTION:** 3440 X 1440 / **REFRESH:** 240HZ

AW3423DW

ALIENWARE $2,099

The first and still one of the best OLED monitors

3

This is it, the daddy, the first true OLED gaming monitor. We were pretty blown away by the Alienware AW3423DW when we first saw it over a year ago, and not a lot has changed. This is still a stunning monitor.

It runs Samsung's QD-OLED tech, so full-screen brightness is no problem. More to the point, the HDR performance is pretty epic, with one proviso. A matte anti-glare coating slightly undermines the OLED panel's perfect black levels, which is a pity. Still, we also love the 34-inch ultrawide aspect ratio, it's just so immersive compared to a plain old 16:9 panel. Then there's the epic response you get with all OLED monitors and the low latency thanks to a 175Hz refresh.

OK, there are monitors with higher refresh. But that's quick enough for most needs short of pro esports. No, our main objection is the painful pricing, which is partly a factor of full Nvidia G-Sync Ultimate support, which costs plenty but doesn't actually add all that much.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Gorgeous ultrawide OLED panel
- No brightness issues
- Too pricey versus the competition

SPECS SIZE: 34-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** SAMSUNG QD-OLED / **RESOLUTION:** 3440 X 1440 / **REFRESH:** 175HZ

AW3423DWF

ALIENWARE $1,599

This is as good as OLED gaming currently gets

4

Add a single letter, save $500. That's the Alienware AW3423DWF for you, cheaper sibling to the full-spec Alienware AW3423DW. But what are you giving up?

Actually, almost nothing, just the mostly pointless Nvidia G-Sync module and 10Hz of refresh rate. That's a downtuning of the spec to 165Hz that we suspect is mostly symbolic. Whatever, what you do keep is the fabulous Samsung QD-OLED 34-inch ultrawide panel in all its HDR glory.

Goodness, it's gorgeous. What's more, it actually looks better in this cheaper Alienware 'F' model thanks to a glossy coating. That really brings out those black levels at the same time as letting that quantum-dot brightness do its thing.

Overall, there are few compromises, especially compared to alternatives with brightness-challenged LG panels, and loads to like, from incredible pixel speed to fantastic HDR punch. Overall, it's just what we've been hoping for from OLED tech and, for now at least, probably the best OLED gaming monitor on the market.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Epic ultrawide OLED experience
- Punchy full-screen brightness
- Cheaper than the G-Sync version

SPECS SIZE: 34-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** SAMSUNG QD-OLED / **RESOLUTION:** 3440 X 1440 / **REFRESH:** 165HZ

5

PHILIPS HAS DITCHED THE NVIDIA G-SYNC MODULE AND SWAPPED IN A USB-C PORT WITH POWER DELIVERY

GO FOR THE BURN

Burn-in is the biggest worry when it comes to OLED technology. It happens because the red, green and blue subpixels in OLED panels wear out at slightly different rates.

Of course, you won't care about the specifics if you find a ghostly shadow of the Windows taskbar etched into the bottom of your pricey OLED panel. You'll just wonder where the money went.

For now, there's no definitive verdict. Only two companies make the actual panels that go into OLED monitors: LG and Samsung. And there are some indications that LG's WOLED tech is slightly more burn-in resistant than Samsung's QD-OLED.

If you're particularly worried, then, go for a monitor with an LG panel. But all the options here are covered by a burn-in guarantee for a few years. So, there's no immediate cause for concern.

Evnia 34M2C8600

PHILIPS $TBA

Philips has gone glossy and it makes all the difference

5

OLED monitors are surely synonymous with cutting edge technology. Right now, it's the ultimate screen tech, right? Probably. But it's a surprisingly old-school feature that most impressed us about the Philips Evnia 34M2C8600. Yup, it's the glossy screen coating. And it makes all the difference compared to the matte coating on the Alienware AW3423DW.

Admittedly, Alienware has since added the AW3423DWF to its lineup, which is also glossy. But it was Philips that first proved how it maximises the contrast and black levels. That glossy coating really lets OLED panel tech sing. Elsewhere, you get a full 175Hz refresh and zippy pixel response, all wrapped up in an essentially identical 34-inch ultrawide package. But Philips has ditched the Nvidia G-Sync module and swapped in a USB-C port with power delivery.

The latter arguably isn't hugely relevant for gaming. So we'd opt for the cheaper 'F'-spec Alienware. But this Philips Evnia is still a super-sweet screen.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- OLED screen tech done right
- Glossy coating makes a difference
- Expensive

SPECS SIZE: 34-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** SAMSUNG QD-OLED / **RESOLUTION:** 3440 X 1440 / **REFRESH:** 175HZ

Xeneon 27QHD240

CORSAIR $1,899

Corsair's 1440p OLED panel lacks pizazz

6

A thousand quid or very likely thereabouts is an awful lot for a 27-inch 1440p monitor. But such are the extremes of OLED tech, you can actually have a 48-inch 4K model from Gigabyte for less.

Of course, this Corsair monitor gets newer LG OLED panel tech. That does help a little with full-screen brightness. But the 27QHD240 still lacks punch. For sure, it's well behind screens with Samsung's QD-OLED tech for brightness, never mind an LCD monitor with a turbocharged mini-LED backlight. Still, the black levels are impeccable and the combination of 240Hz refresh and that signature OLED pixel speed makes for an outrageously pacey monitor. Speaking of which, the modest 2,560 x 1,440 res does at least mean that it's much easier to achieve those ultra-high frame rates than with a full 4K monitor.

It's just at this price point, 27 inches just doesn't feel terribly impressive. It's a good monitor, this Corsair Xeneon. We just want something a bit more dramatic for this much money.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Super speedy pixels
- 240Hz refresh
- Lacks just a little punch

SPECS SIZE: 27-INCH / **PANEL TYPE:** LG WOLED / **RESOLUTION:** 2560 X 1440 / **REFRESH:** 240HZ

VR NOT AMUSED

Why VIRTUAL REALITY makes some of us sick, and what we can do about it

Let me tell you why Apple's US$3,500 (~AUD$5,300!) VR headset announcement made my heart sink. I know this is a PC mag, but when an industry player that big tries to make VR a part of everyday life it affects everyone. PC gaming doesn't exist in a bubble.

It's not because the idea of seeing my iPhone menu buttons everywhere I look, all day, forever, is so nightmarish, or because $5,300 for a toy was presented like a perfectly rational purchasing decision. Me and VR, we've just never hit it off.

My first experience of it was about as bad as you could possibly engineer, if you were deliberately trying to make someone nauseous. An Oculus DK2, a PC that couldn't quite run a rollercoaster demo at a high-enough framerate, and a slightly-too-hot office full of people watching me as I put on the headset. Before I'd completed the second loop-de-loop, it was clear that VR and I were not going to be good friends.

Like a great many people, virtual reality makes me feel pretty sick. It's not that I haven't tried to push past it, either. There's a lot of talk about getting your sea legs in VR, acclimating to the strange sensation of perceiving motion with your eyes and expecting to feel it with your body but getting nothing. I saw the potential VR had for sim racing. I bravely soldiered through three stages in *Dirt Rally*, my stomach tying itself into a balloon animal every time I put two wheels up onto a verge and my cockpit view went diagonal. But the nausea never went away.

It's been eight years now since that virtual roller coaster ride, and my brain hasn't acclimated yet. I so badly wanted to enjoy *Half-Life: Alyx*, and it's true that Valve's peerless design and engineering smoothed the roughest edges of the experience, as does a solid, high framerate and teleport controls rather than – I'm feeling queasy just typing this – analogue stick movement. But it's not a fix.

THE NAUSEA WE FEEL AFTER EXPERIENCING VR IS A FORM OF MOTION SICKNESS

And it turns out I'm not in the minority. The latest figures gathered in 2022 estimate that between 40-70% of users experience sickness within 15 minutes of exposure. For women specifically, it's even higher, up to 80%. And we don't know why.

What we do know, more or less, is that the nausea we feel after experiencing VR is a form of motion sickness. It's basically a runtime error in our vestibular system, the complex instruments in our inner ear that track our position and movement. The data that our eyes is giving to our vestibular system is that we're in motion, whether we're on a ship on choppy waters, in a car, or in *Project CARs*, but in each case our body itself is stationary. The best theory we have on why this disconnect between perceived and actual motion provokes nausea is that our body thinks we've been poisoned.

STEEL HORSES

Before the days of steel horses and piston-powered locomotion, the likely explanation for feeling like you're whizzing around while stationary was that you ate, drank or rubbed up against something you shouldn't have. You've taken on toxins that are impeding your perception, and your body needs to get those toxins out. Fast.

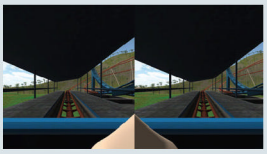
It's just a theory. And in fact, a theory from 1977. But it's the science world's best guess so far. What's more, we don't know why some people are so much more susceptible to it than others, but we know that there are numerous markers that make us more likely to experience it. Women, as mentioned previously, are more likely than men to get VR sick. Asian people are more likely than other ethnicities to experience motion sickness in general. Age is another factor – we're more likely to experience it between the ages of 12 and 21 than in our adulthood... until we reach our 50s, upon which the likelihood increases again.

Apple forgot to mention that in its announcement though, didn't they? Just like Facebook did when they

PHIL IWANIUK
We thought sick boy Phil had finally got his VR legs a while back. Turned out he'd simply taken to using our Valve Index as a sleep mask during lunchtimes.

STRONG AND STABLE *Four possible solutions to VR motion sickness*

BOARDING RING GLASSES
This French startup makes glasses that create an artificial horizon to counteract motion sickness, and released an add-on for VR headsets recently which it claims reduces nausea by up to 94%.



GALVANIC VESTIBULAR STIMULATION
Devices like this one pass electrical signals through your vestibular system to compensate for the discrepancy between perceived and actual motion.

NASUM VIRTUALIS
Researchers at Purdue University discovered that adding in a virtual nose to a VR scene – a nasum virtualis, for you Latin enthusiasts, has a greatly positive impact on VR motion sickness.

JUST SPEND MORE MONEY?
Each new generation of VR headset purports to have minimised the possibility of sickness, but that's been the case for eight years now and many of us have seen little to no improvement.

launched various Oculus and Meta Quest products that can, did, and will make most of us feel sick. They've invested billions into making the platform happen, and they'll be damned if eight years of lukewarm consumer reception is going to change their plans.

PROMISING DEVELOPMENTS

What are the solutions? Since we're not sure of the cause, that's a tricky one. But there are promising developments that all endeavour to ground us in our surroundings and give our vestibular system the context it needs not to go into purge mode. The hope is that if VR does become more mainstream, the need to address this issue becomes more urgent and both big tech funding and market demand brings about a solution. In the meantime, if you want me I'll be in a dark room with my head between my knees. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Top-drawer VR implementation like that in *Half-Life: Alyx* alleviates the problems. On the other hand: headcrabs.

LEFT: The Index. Portal to countless virtual worlds. Also for up to 80% of us: feeling awful.

RIGHT: We have to admit though, Apple's Vision Pro does look spectacularly cool when worn.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"I unload my shotgun into his face at point-blank range"

Returning to RAGE against the soulless machine

I stare into the cold, dead eyes of the NPC quest vendor as he narrates my latest go here, kill that, pick up this mission to bring his wasteland community a little respite, and I feel his pain. This is because, whenever *Rage* stops, well, raging for any moment, its cold, soulless core raises its head.

I've started a replay of *Rage* after not playing the game since launch and, while I've got more appreciation than ever I think now for the technology that powers this game, and its strong core first-person shooter gunplay, the truth is time has done nothing to magically add-in the things that this game never had to begin with.

The good news is that *Rage* still plays, as both a corridor FPS and, surprisingly, a fun *Carmageddon*-style destruction-orientated driving game, really well. id had such expertise in FPS design that this is no surprise, but there's a huge satisfaction still to running through its one-way kill corridors and unloading a variety of weapons at bandits, mutants etc.

The animation on many of the enemy NPCs in combat remains genuinely impressive to this day, with some really dynamic and slick animations letting characters dodge and weave, roll, wall-run, jump over obstacles, take cover, duck and generally snake toward you while trying to cave your head in. Enemies in *Rage* do not just see you and then run at you in a straight line waiting for death, and that makes combat engaging, albeit at sometimes borderline hilarious, with enemies performing some acrobatic displays.

Early on in my current play session, after just getting the game's shotgun, I'm tasked with clearing out some raiders. I enter the raider base and a baddie proceeds to see me, and then he begins to show off this variety of animations in full, with him flipping over a table, sliding to his right, mounting the corridor's wall to then wall-run at me, before then

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Somersaulted off a quadbike while shrieking hysterically.

ALSO PLAYED
Diablo IV, Duke Nukem Forever

TOP: This guy OD'd on peri-peri hot sauce.

THE ANIMATION ON MANY OF THE ENEMY NPCS IN COMBAT REMAINS IMPRESSIVE

Oooo! Pretty post-apocalypse air balloons.

flipping off the wall and landing just in front of me brandishing his weapon. I unload my shotgun into his face at point-blank range.

ANGER MANAGEMENT

But so far, just like I remember from playing the game originally, as soon as I move out of these corridor shooting galleries and am invited to engage with the world of *Rage* or its inhabitants, all my vigour just drops away. I don't like these dull NPCs and they very rarely have anything interesting or character-building to say. The truth is they're boring and characterless and exist entirely to spew forth quests, exposition (that I don't care about), or items.

I don't really care that *Rage* was never a more open-world game, with the player essentially progressing through a series of hubs that they then spoke off of. I honestly don't think that hurts this game much, even if *Rage 2* went a long way to making a more open structure work.

But despite the frequent illusions to the contrary, there's no depth here. The wider world of *Rage* and its lore and characters remain skin deep, and completely and utterly soulless.

Quick, pass me a shotgun, I've stopped raging again. ■

"A charming little railway simulator"

STATION TO STATION's train set makes a great demo

IAN EVENDEN

THIS MONTH
Wrote to CERN about the great voxel cover-up

ALSO PLAYED
Blade Runner, Cloudpunk

Voxels were meant to be the future. These volumetric pixels act like tiny *Minecraft* blocks, building things up in their billions to create truly 3D objects in your PC's memory rather than the 2D illusions we see from most games today.

Sadly, like the water-powered car and every perpetual motion machine ever made, there were shadowy forces acting against them. Big Pixel, with its so-called 'GPUs' and alleged 'rendering', has forced the truth of voxels underground, with a small cadre of believers keeping the dream alive. But unlike the two examples earlier, voxels exist, and they work.

They're what give *Station to Station* its distinctive look. The game, which exists only as a demo on Steam at the time of writing, is a charming little railway simulator that occurs on a chunk of floating land rather like that in *Into the Breach*.

Unlike that game there are no aliens invading – at least not yet, but there are many levels to go. Instead, it's more wholesome entertainment, constructing tracks between dairy farms and cheese makers, arable land to mills and bakeries, before bringing it all together and making a delivery.

ROUTE BLOCKAGE

Connect two compatible nodes, and an explosion of greenery occurs, like someone's let off a Genesis device (or has been playing *Terra Nil*). Hook a city up with several of the things it needs, and you'll score a combo, golden voxel coins flying across the screen into your fat purse.

Station to Station mixes it up a bit using cards, cheaper rails and bridges that can be played when you think they'll help your finances such as on a really complex bridge that no serious engineer would ever countenance, but the best thing about the demo is the way buildings arrive.

They drop from orbit, fully formed, as if there were Star Destroyers up there and you're an Imperial commander requisitioning their own private model railway. The depth of field effect helps this feeling of playing with something tiny.

But it's the voxel look that gives *Station to Station* its charm, the bucolic levels bursting into life thanks to the simple application of metal rails, and it's discoveries like this that make Steam demos worthwhile. ■

"Why did Edward Diego turn his back on humanity to serve SHODAN?"

A hoot and a half from cyberhell in SYSTEM SHOCK

The *System Shock* remake has been one of those "having trouble putting it down" games for me for a whole host of reasons: the atmosphere, the chunky combat, and the sense of discovery around every corner to name a few. But one of the most surprising has been how funny it is.

This is almost entirely without scripted, discrete jokes too, with the notable exception of a delightful MST3K/RiffTrax Easter egg that'd have been right at home in a 10 Luck playthrough of the original *Fallout*. But I'm talking more about emergent, immersive sim slapstick and the plain absurdity of Citadel Station's tragedy.

There was this one time I was peeking around the corner at a Security Bot Mk 2, trying to think of the best plan of attack. I decided to open with a grenade, and used *System Shock*'s '90s throwback lean function to peek around and toss the hot potato. But oh no! It bounced off the wall right back at me, landing between my feet. At another point I was caught between a Cyborg Assassin and a Security Bot Mk 1. I opened a door to scurry away from the Bot and get a better position only to run right into the Assassin. Instead of firing at me, he decided to drop a proximity mine right there at point blank. I barely even noticed as I kept trying to get away, but my presence immediately tripped the thing. It took out both the Bot and the Assassin, but I was moving so fast I barely took any damage. The tactical mastermind has logged on.

TED LITCHFIELD

THIS MONTH
Authoring my own doom with poorly placed grenades.

ALSO PLAYED
Amnesia: The Bunker, Baldur's Gate

REMEMBER CITADEL

You can practically hear the Curb Your Enthusiasm theme playing when the Hacker wakes up on Citadel to find that the AI they jerry-rigged six months prior went haywire and killed everyone. Every time I pick up an audio log of someone's gruesome last moments I'm proverbially tugging at my collar and going, "Yeeeesh, did I do that?"

Instead of the sombre, self-serious, Objectivism/Manifest Destiny-flavoured theme parks of *BioShock*, I love that Citadel is just a zany, kooky place. Why is it an impenetrable switchback maze? Human psychological experiments! Why did Edward Diego turn his back on humanity to serve SHODAN? He's just an arsehole! SHODAN herself practically feels like a sitcom nemesis, her transhumanist plans foiled at every corner by my bumbling.

The *System Shock* remake has a Johnny Mnemonic or The Fifth Element vibe to it, and not just in its analogue neon future. I love that it has this ambient, surreal goofiness, while still conveying a great sci-fi thriller of a story. Immersive sims may be the thinking gamer's FPS, but it's nice to see them loosen up and have fun every now and again. ■

I'M PROVERBIALLY TUGGING AT MY COLLAR AND GOING, "YEEEESH, DID I DO THAT?"

FAR LEFT: Man, I should finally play *Prey*.

BELOW: Hey, "Heads up!" Get it?

Stormtrooper corpse: model's own.

"When I have to fight, what I want is the illusion that I'm skilled"

Getting Saturday Nightsister Fever in STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

I completed *Fallen Order* only recently, fuelled by the post-Andor glow, and really enjoyed myself. Cal was bearable, the Mantis crew were endearing enough, and, well, lightsabers and Stormtroopers were involved. It was hokey, yes, but so much of Star Wars is, and I have no wish to pull on that thread. The arrival of the sequel hot off the back of this experience spoke to the five-year-old inside me. He has a hole in his soul the shape of a Star Destroyer, and he got all excited just hearing the music start up.

He shouldn't, because this is a *Souls*-like. Combos and boss fights are a nightmare for me as I'm way too uncoordinated. However, *Survivor* has variable difficulty settings, including my favourite story mode. Because that's a big part of why I'm here. When I have to fight, what I want is the illusion that I'm skilled and powerful, maybe a little lucky. As I cut through swathes of Stormtroopers like a hot lightsaber through bantha milk butter, *Survivor* provides what *Fallen Order* did, and more. I am a warrior monk, albeit one who can't walk up a gentle slope of gravel and falls off things a lot.

But do you know who doesn't have that problem? Merrin, the Nightsister. She just zaps around, with a casual disregard for challenge of any kind and a good line in snark.

MATT KILLEEN

THIS MONTH
Battled more crashes than Stormtroopers.

ALSO PLAYED
Hitman 3, Dorfromantic

BLACK MAGICK WOMAN

She was my favourite character in *Fallen Order* and her reappearance gave me an actual thrill. Watching her fight her way round Jeddah, with burning hands, green lightning and enchanted staff, I stopped playing just to revel in the glory of it. At least when she wasn't watching me screw up basic jumps and swings, over and over, like my daughter had to when we played *It Takes Two*.

Merrin is badass in a way that makes Jedi look very ordinary, and with an elan and personality that Cal can only dream about. I'm far more interested in what she's been up to on her galactic gap-year than anything he's done, which seems to be making poor decisions like setting emo Sith Lords free. We know this Jedi thing inside out, but the story of the last Nightsister? That's a book I'd read, a game I'd play and a series I'd watch.

When she decides to stay on Jeddah instead of going on the MacGuffin hunt with Cal, I have to admit, I lost interest in the game a bit. If they turn her into a villain in the end, I'll be very cross indeed, but EA Play crashed right then and hasn't worked since, so maybe I'll never find out. ■

COMBOS AND BOSS FIGHTS ARE A NIGHTMARE FOR ME AS I'M WAY TOO UNCOORDINATED

BLACK & WHITE 2

When Molyneux took god games to the genre's limit. *By Robert Jones*

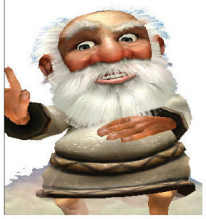
What exactly is a god game? It's a question that I'm quite sure if you asked a hundred PC gamers almost all would answer with, "Well, it's a game in which you play some sort of deity." And that's definitively true. It is a prerequisite for a game to be classed in this genre.

However, with that established prerequisite crossed off the list, what exactly is a god game? What do you do? What is the story? What are gaming mechanics? How does the game look and feel? How does the player interact with the game world? And how do all these things interact together? Here the answer from those exact same hundred PC gamers would be indefinite and mixed. There would be differing opinions. Rewind the clock back to the dawn of the 21st century and these are the questions that, directly or not, Peter Molyneux (arguably the father of the whole genre with *Populous* in 1989) was trying to answer with his seminal 2001 god game *Black & White*.

DEUS EX LUDO

Lodging an astronomically high score back in the day of 94 per cent, reviewer Tim Stone concluded that the game was "overflowing with great ideas and novel devices" and that "*B&W* is indeed divine entertainment".

So what was *Black & White*'s interpretation of a god game? You play a god (naturally) and with the help of your physical representation in the world of Eden, a giant animal of your choice, you look to inspire faith in your human followers (which is where you draw your power from) and gain more through your awe-inspiring feats, in turn expanding their civilisation settlement sim-style. Convert enough rival villages to worship you and you take over the island you're on and progress to the next level. That's the gameplay loop.



On paper quite basic, but *B&W* built on this with – especially for the time – incredibly progressive and creative control and gameplay systems. This married with the then typical Molyneux charm in terms of feel, and the inherent joy of watching your animal avatar grow, evolve and, often, just play around, meant that playing god ended up being tons of fun in a kind of joyously childish and unstructured way, even if the underlying gameplay was shallow, as plenty of reviewers at the time pointed out. Beneath the surface, there wasn't too much game, but the creativity surrounding the Tamagotchi-like avatar, game control systems and presentation, made *B&W* the king of the god games.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 2005	**DEVELOPER** Lionhead Studios
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts	**LINK** bit.ly/42YGFTP

ABOVE: Each island has its own unique look and challenges.

RIGHT: Building out your empire, one settlement at a time.

To this day *Black & White* holds a Metacritic score of 90%, with the game receiving 'Universal Acclaim' from reviewers.

BIGGER, NOT BETTER

Enter *Black & White 2*. So, how do you build on that universal acclaim? This is what Molyneux said in an interview while the game was in development. "I know we're going to get our heads... just... sliced off for this," says designer Peter Molyneux with a rueful smile, "but we're working on a game that will totally revolutionise both real-time strategy and 'god games' by bringing them together under one roof.""

On the face of it, this seems like not only the right decision but also a typically ambitious one for Molyneux. OK, so one of the biggest areas to improve on *B&W* is a need for more substantial game mechanics under the visually impressive, creative and whimsical top layer. OK, well why not marry this god game element with the more established and game-stuffed RTS genre? It made sense to me then, as someone who bought and loved the original *B&W*, and it still makes sense to me now in 2023.

ON PAPER, THAT SOUNDS LIKE ONE OF THE MOST MARVELLOUS GAMES OF ALL TIME

And that is indeed what Molyneux and his team did. When *B&W 2* launched in 2005 it introduced an RTS troop-based combat system that allowed players to not just win levels by building up their civilisation and winning converts through an impressiveness score, but to also win by engaging in some good old-fashioned RTS warfare. Build combat troops and then, with the help of your animal avatar and godly powers (such as hurling fireballs), take enemy cities by force.

You now had a god game that delivered the Tamagotchi-style avatar game mechanics of the first game, civilisation SIM building mechanics, and now RTS combat play mechanics as well. On paper, that sounds like not just a lot of actual game, but also a worthy sequel to the original *B&W* and one of the most marvellous,

THE BLACK & WHITE TIMELINE

The series got four products released by Lionhead Studios

BLACK & WHITE
2001
The original *Black & White* launches, introducing players to their worshipers, godly powers and animal avatars for the first time.

BLACK & WHITE: CREATURE ISLE
2002
Black & White gets an expansion pack that delivers new animal avatars and miracle powers for use in the game.

BLACK & WHITE 2
2005
A long-awaited sequel arrives, delivering enhanced graphics, tweaked gameplay, and expanded but light RTS mechanics.

B&W 2: BATTLE OF THE GODS
2006
The sequel gets its own expansion pack, with a new story mission, avatars and miracles. The last series entry.

Being evil is more fun. Obey the tiny, cute devil.

LEFT: Your temple is really important, and is where you as a god are worshipped.

ABOVE: The ability to zoom fully in and out on islands remains visually impressive.

creative games of all time. The problem was, though, as our review at the time stated "it just doesn't work", with the "defining play that should be at the centre of everything, lacking".

The biggest problem, as highlighted by many reviews at the time, is that while *Black & White 2* offers an almost staggering amount of genre systems and ideas, individually they're just not executed as well, or with anywhere near as much depth, as the genres they're combining. The game was outbuilt by dedicated civ building games like *SimCity* and also out manoeuvred by full-fat RTS games like *Rome: Total War*, and not just by a bit, but by a lot. The additions were skin deep. As such, the game ended up being a flawed jack-of-all-trades. Worse still, as reviews stated, these shallow dives into gameplay mechanics also sat on top of plenty of unfixed issues from the first game, some wildly uneven pacing, and some dodgy and easily gameable AI.

BATTLE OF GODS

Fast forward to 2023, and playing the game (which takes a fair amount of effort today thanks to the game's puzzling total unavailability on any digital store; I used my original copy of *B&W 2* in partnership with a series of third-party community patches to get it running on modern hardware), even with many OG launch issues fixed, this lack of depth in gameplay systems, overly slow pacing, inconsistent UI control, and easily game-able AI remains evident. The

DEUS REX *Which animal is king of the gods?*

APE
The smartest of all creature avatars, and a good fighter too. An all-rounder.

LION
The most powerful animal avatar, but not the brightest. Leans slightly toward evil.

WOLF
The fastest animal avatar, and one that looks fierce if representing an evil player deity.

TURTLE
Introduced in the *Battle of the Gods* expansion pack. An avatar that defo leans to the good.

COW
A moo-velous (sorry) animal avatar, especially for good, non-violent gods. Look at his smile!

TIGER
Originally a *B&W 2* collectors edition exclusive. Plays similarly to the Lion.

My worshippers dig me busting out the dance moves.

passing of time has not magically fixed these fundamental issues with *B&W 2*. Camera controls remain frustrating 50 percent of the time, and by modern standards are overly complicated. I found myself using a combination of keyboard controls and mouse presses too often just to get a specific viewpoint I wanted, which led to a frustrating dance of uncoordinated finger movements and audible curses. Using my god hand also proved to be more frustrating than I remember. Sometimes the gesture controls work well, such as when I'm scratching my tiger avatar's tummy, plucking trees from the ground and placing structures, while other times not so much. I'd be holding something in my hand that I wanted to relinquish and would find myself waggling the mouse back and forth, the gesture for it, only for the hand to stubbornly hold fast. Other times I'd accidentally slap my creature or, once, I accidentally gave him one of my human settlers and before I could react, he ate him.

But, being honest, the thing that grabs me most replaying this game is not the negatives, but actually the creative positives of the game that, being candid, I feel the passage of time has just highlighted even more.

MOLYNEUX HIT THE GOD GAME GENRE'S LIMIT FOR WHAT WAS ACTUALLY POSSIBLE

Today, triple-A games don't deliver anywhere near the creative risks and experimentation that *B&W 2* took, and for all his well-documented over promising faults, you've got to tip your hat to Molyneux here for attempting such a radical game.

Yes, what stands out most replaying *B&W 2* now is that there was once a time when this sort of big budget, genre-bending creative experiment of a game could be attempted. Today, almost always, interesting new gameplay mechanics and genre cross-overs debut in small, independent games, with triple-A mainstream games incredibly conservative. And that's definitely a loss to PC gaming.

Because, at times, *B&W 2* still delivers pure magic. Visually it still remains a treat and the core gameplay of messing around with your animal avatar, as well as building up your civilisation and performing miracles, remains addictive and fun. That mix of scale between your giant deity and your civilisation and its inhabitants, constantly evokes creature-features like Godzilla, and there's a childish joy evoked by just hanging out on your magical island. Combat, too, providing you're happy to overlook the simplistic troop mechanics and enemy AI, can also be engaging when you and your avatar get manually involved.

FALLING FROM HEAVEN

My feeling then, is that while god games have continued to be released since *B&W 2*, notably as much smaller titles, this AAA game really was where Molyneux hit the god game genre's limit for what was actually possible. Fundamentally, the weight of combining so many systems with such an experimental level of creativity in terms of game-interaction controls and core Tamagotchi-style gameplay, ended up being too much for Lionhead Studios to execute back in the mid 2000s. Like Icarus, I can't shake the feeling that *B&W 2* attempted to fly too high, to take the god game genre truly to heaven, but got burned and fell back down to Earth.

While *Black & White 2*'s in full flight, though, it remains a beautiful, singular PC gaming experience. ■

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